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OR,

The Brand-Burner's Daughter.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "WHIP-KING JOE," "THE BOY
PARDS," "THE BOY TRAILERS," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A NIGHT CAMP ON THE TRAIL.

"AUGH! come in out o' the wet, an' let up tryin' to play coyote, you! If you want any-thing o' this outfit, all you've got to do is to dominate it."

"An' a hurry 'll save time, too!"

"Not to mention ca'tridges!"

In rapid succession and from three different pair of lips came these sentences, each one punctuated by the sharp click of a Winchester rifle as, with thumb on hammer, finger on trigger

AND THEN—IT SEEMED A MIRACLE, EVEN TO HIMSELF!—HE CAUGHT WILDA GALE
IN HIS ARMS AS SHE FELL TOWARD THE EARTH!

and muzzles turned toward the gloom which reigned beyond the little circle of firelight, the three cowboys stood shoulder to shoulder in reckless defiance of the odds which their sharp challenge might uncover.

A brief silence, then a cold, stern voice replied:

"Touch lightly on those triggers, if you please, gentlemen. If you're working on the square, you have nothing to fear from us."

"But we're so durn skeery we can't help it!" laughed the tallest of the trio. "Only look! Jest three little boys sent out into the wilderness fer to drive the cows up. It comes on dark, an' the wolves yelp, an' the owls tune up tell we git so powerful bad skeered that we got to stop an' start a fire fer to find our pluck ag'in. An' then we hear some pizen critters snoopin' 'round in the dark, like they was—"

"Durn the palaver!" growled another of the cowboys, his voice grim and threatening. "Ef you want anything here, show up! Ef not, then skin out while yer hide's whole."

"You talk too blunt to be rogues; and as we're friendly with all honest men, we'll avail ourselves of your polite invitation," retorted the owner of the unseen voice, as two men stepped inside the circle of firelight.

The cowboys eyed them keenly, then interchanged swift glances. The result seemed to be satisfactory, for they immediately lowered their weapons.

"You're welcome as good whisky to a dry throat, gents!" cordially uttered the tall cowboy. "We couldn't size you up out there in the dark, and our fu'st idea was that some o' them pesky brand-burners was feelin' 'round fer our long-horns."

"Just the mistake we made," laughed the stranger, doffing his hat and running his fingers through his hair. "It's not often that regulars pass through here with so small a drive, and as the shortest way of settling all doubts at rest, I asked my friend here to step over with me."

"Sorry you tuck so much trouble, ef you're a 'fence'—"

"Which I certainly am not!" sharply interposed the man, his face flushing and his eyes gleaming hotly. "My name is Carl Wesendorf, and I am a deputy-sheriff for Wilbarger. I came here to arrest you, if you can't show clean papers. I'm going to put a stop to this infernal brand-burning if it takes a lifetime!"

"When you do, may we all be there to holler amen!"

"Talk is cheap, and I've known a rogue to pray twice as loud as an honest man," uttered Wesendorf, with a coolness that was almost insulting. "You may be all right, but it's my duty to make sure of this."

"Duty's good!" broke in another of the cowboys, with a short, hard laugh, adding: "Course you don't travel on such 'portant business 'thout kerryin' the papers to show what ye be, an' whar you got your 'thority?"

Without deigning any reply to this speaker, Wesendorf took a paper from his breast-pocket and handed it to the tall cowboy, saying, a little stiffly:

"There is my commission, signed by the sheriff, T. L. Stewart. Satisfy yourself that I am all I claim, and then I will take my turn at asking questions."

In the fall of the year 1883, Wilbarger was in the height of its unenviable reputation as being the worst county in the State of Texas. Ever since the raising of stock became a prominent interest in the Lone Star State, that particular section has been a paradise for cattle-thieves.

Even at the present date, the location of Wilbarger is far enough away from the railroads to make communication with it slow and uncertain, while its geographical relations to the rest of the State could not be better for the purpose of the speculating rascals. To the east lie the Red river counties of Northern Texas; from the south and southwest come the cattle-trails of that portion of Texas, leading straight through the county of Wilbarger. To the north and northwest is the Panhandle. All around it lie the cattle-ranges, and Wilbarger must be passed through to reach the railroad shipping points in the Indian Territory.

Wilbarger is, in contrast to the country surrounding it, an oasis, with plenty of water, and choice farming land. For this reason it has been left unoccupied by the stock-growers, knowing as they did that they could not long expect to hold such rich lands at rates which would make cattle-raising profitable. For this reason it was left for the soil-tiller, but thus far

they have been slow to come, owing to the bad name given the county by its early settlers.

Previous to the war which the cowmen, through the Executive Committee of the Cattle-raisers' Association, instituted on the roughs of Wilbarger, the machinery for cattle-thieving was almost perfect. These predatory people roamed about over their county and penetrated the most convenient ranges, picking up cattle wherever they could find them straying from the main herds. All animals found were booty. If they were unbranded, the finder applied his own and gathered them in with his bunch. If already branded, then was put in operation that great iniquity of the cattle business—"brand-burning." With a hot iron the cow-pirate smeared over the honest owner's mark until obliterated, then, in a fresh place, applied his own.

This Wilbarger industry was so generally recognized that there was no stealing of one thief from another, and no informing. When a bunch of cattle had been picked up by one of these burners, he made a sale to some semi-respectable cattle company, which would take from him a guarantee of rebate in case the burned animal was identified and reclaimed. Of course such companies made all haste to turn such cattle into beef, but if any of the stock was recognized, it was surrendered without opposition, simply stating that the animals had been purchased on an arrangement by which the seller should indemnify them in case any were proven "irregular." Thus the company preserved a legal status, and acted as "fence" for the thieves, who were well covered by this system.

In addition, as has since been plainly proved by the newspaper press and in the courts, many a high official was in secret sympathy with the nefarious league, even if they did not share in the ill-gotten proceeds.

Thus matters stood when we open our story. The tall cowboy read the document handed him by Carl Wesendorf, then handed it back, saying:

"I reckon it's all right, but you can't fault us fer actin' a little skeery, like, after all that's bin done in the way o' cattle-stealin' an' brand-burnin'."

"Nor you blame me for doubting your squareness," was the pointed retort. "I have showed my credentials; now you want to prove your title clear to this bunch of long-horns."

"That won't take long," with a short laugh. "These, my pards, is called Dick Stumpf an' Tom Hickey. My han'le is Bill Fracker, better knowed, prehaps, as Bouncin' Bill, head man o' the Dearnin' ranch, over—"

"Cuthbert Dearnin?" hastily asked Wesendorf. "Him as was, yes," slowly. "The widder putt me in as overseer when the old man croaked. She wanted a little ready cash jest now, an' so she set us off with a hundred head to ketch a man who bought them by letter. Ef you're as well posted as a deputy ort to be, you know the brand. Come out an' see fer your own self that it's all square."

Bouncing Bill lit a small bull's-eye lantern and strode away from the camp-fire, followed by the two men. Silently he turned the light on one animal after the other, showing the clearly-outlined brands, only ceasing when Wesendorf declared his last doubts of their squareness set at rest.

"Nobody ain't blamin' of ye, sheriff," said Fracker, as they returned to the camp-fire. "Fer one, I'm only too mighty glad that somebody is takin' up the matter by the right eend. It's only a pity it wasn't did afore the ole man ketched it."

"That was indeed a sad affair," quietly uttered Wesendorf, as he joined the cowboys in squatting before the fire, lighting a pipe with them. "I wasn't in the county when it happened, though I got here soon afterward."

"Durned queer how it come the ole man hung hisself," muttered Dick Stumpf. "Reckon he went sort o' lunny, over the loss o' his cattle. But we never looked fer any sich eend to his trail—he was so chuck-full o' sand."

"But he did it—it was a plain case of suicide," uttered the companion of Carl Wesendorf, who had not spoken until now. "We all agreed on that verdict."

Commonplace though the words were, there was a poorly-hidden eagerness in the manner and tone of the man that caused the eyes of the cowboys to turn curiously toward him. As he felt their glances, his face flushed hotly, then turned a livid white, his burning eyes shifting uneasily.

"My friend, Abner Gale, gentlemen," said Wesendorf, in an off-hand manner. "He was foreman of the coroner's jury that investigated the affair."

At the same time, unseen by the giant, he made a significant motion, as of drinking, then imitated the crawling of a snake, softly tapping his boots, as though to convey the impression that Gale was on the verge of delirium tremens.

This seemed reasonable enough, to look at his face. In every line was betrayed the hard drinker, though there still remained traces of former masculine beauty.

Abner Gale was just in the prime of powerful manhood, so far as years went, being not much beyond the fortieth mile-post. In stature he was almost gigantic, being several inches over six feet in height. His limbs and body were in due proportion, and it was evident that at no very distant day he might have posed for a statue of a gladiatorial athlete.

He was dark in complexion, his head and face covered with luxuriant masses of hair, once jetty black, but now tinged with gray. His large eyes were slightly bloodshot; his fingers twitched and trembled; he cast sly glances around him, like one who dreads the appearance of some loathed or terrible object. This, with the fumes of rank liquor which diffused from his clothes and heavy breath, told a too plain story.

Carl Wesendorf, also, was one who might have been chosen as a model of strength and power, though in a different degree from that which marked his companion. In height he was nearly a head shorter, but with equally broad shoulders and ponderous limbs. In repose, a stranger would have thought him sluggish and even clumsy, for without being in the least fat, his weight could not have been less than two hundred pounds. But, on the contrary, he was active as a panther in his movements.

His face was comely, without being handsome, of the rather heavy type that marks so many Americans of German descent. He spoke without the slightest trace of foreign accent, however.

His hair was close cropped, his face smooth-shorn, save for a huge pair of mustaches. These, yellow as gold, started straight out from his upper lip until beyond the point of his nose, then curved over until his mouth and the greater part of his chin were hidden from view as perfectly as though he wore a mask.

Unlike Abner Gale, who wore the rough-and-ready suit of a frontier farmer, woolen and duck, Wesendorf was dressed in fine and well-made garments, with white shirt and collar. A ring set with diamonds secured his cravat, while a stud in the shape of a cross sparkled on his white bosom. He wore valuable rings on each hand, and the weapons which showed at his waist were valuable ones, plated and ornamented with silver and pearl.

"Reckon they wasn't no show fer a skin game on the old man, then?" ventured Tom Hickey.

"On the contrary, everything pointed to suicide," positively replied Wesendorf. "I looked into the affair myself, though at that time I was only an ordinary citizen, my commission arriving later. It was a case of temporary insanity, beyond a doubt. Enough, too! Two thousand head of beef cattle at a single stroke is enough to turn almost anybody's head!"

"I reckon it must 'a' bin so," nodded Bouncing Bill, gazing moodily into the glowing embers. "But all the same, I'd give a finger to know the dirty devils as made him do it! A whiter man never trod the footstool then Cuthbert Dearnin!"

In this desultory manner the conversation proceeded for some minutes, but as the party all were fairly familiar with the facts of the case, the story itself did not come out with sufficient distinctness in their talk to justify a record here. As a proper understanding of the tragedy hinted at must be had in order for the reader to fully comprehend what follows, a few words in explanation may not come amiss just now.

Cuthbert Dearnin owned an extensive cattle-ranch in one of the southwestern counties, and in order to reach a market, he was obliged to drive through Wilbarger. In the summer of that year, he set out with a selected drove of beef cattle, two thousand in number. It was rather early for a regular drive, but he had a good opportunity for selling, and could not afford to wait. All went well until the confines of Wilbarger were reached, then misfortunes began to pour upon him, culminating in an audacious raid that stripped him of every hoof, despite his own strenuous efforts, as well as those of his hired men. Then, one gray, foggy morning, he was found dead.

He hung by his neck from a tall tree, his feet yards from the ground. His ankles were tied together. His belt was buckled tightly around him, and both hands were ironed, the connecting

chain being passed beneath his belt, thus preventing him from raising his hands to the rope. There was a sapling leaning against the trunk of the tree, and marks showing where some one had climbed up by its means. The rope was firmly knotted around the limb, the end showing no signs of having been recently cut.

The verdict was that, crazed by his heavy loss, Cuthbert Dearin had committed suicide by hanging. The closest scrutiny failed to detect any sign around the tree made by other than his own feet. He could have passed the chain of the handcuffs beneath his belt, adjusted the rope around his throat, snapped on the irons, then jumping off to meet his death. And this was the conclusion almost universally reached.

But there were a few who knew him best, who were not wholly satisfied that it was not a cunning murder instead of a desperate suicide. Cuthbert Dearin was not the man to give way so readily to misfortune, they said. He would fight while the slightest hope of retrieving his losses or of discovering and taking revenge on those who had despoiled him remained.

The party were still discussing the mysterious affair, when a sudden commotion among the cattle, until then peacefully grazing or sleeping, startled them. The cowboys leaped to their feet on the instant, knowing how readily cattle on the trail are stampeded, but before they could do more, a wild, shrill yell rung out upon the night air, and a strange light shot up through the gloom cast over the earth by the clouds.

A breathless pause for an instant after that peculiar yell, then it seemed as though pandemonium had broken loose.

Wild screams in tones scarcely human; snorting and lowing of startled cattle; the clattering of split hoofs; the clashing of horns; then a mad bellowing as the red light shot higher, then turned into a dozen different shades, accompanied by sharp reports. And then, as a huge fiery serpent shot hissing into the midst of the bewildered cattle, the work was done.

With bellowing roars the steers plunged forward, heading straight toward the camp-fire!

"Tree!" yelled Bouncing Bill, setting the example, grasping a low hanging bow and deftly swinging himself up into one of the stunted trees beneath which the camp-fire was kindled. "Tree, ontel the critters pass!"

There was little time to lose, for the cattle, blinded by terror, were heading direct for their position, and nothing short of death could check them in the first mad rush.

The other cowboys quickly imitated the action of their leader, and in an instant were out of the way of immediate danger, but Abner Gale, dazed by strong liquor, only started to his feet and stared bewilderedly around him. If he realized his peril he made no effort to escape it. The light of delirium was in his bloodshot eyes, and only for the prompt action of Carl Wesendorf, he must have met death beneath those terrible hoofs as the stampeding cattle dashed on.

"Are you mad, man?" grated Wesendorf, grasping him by the arm and forcing him to a tree. "Up—remember Wilda!"

A wild cry escaped the lips of the drunkard at that name, and he rapidly scaled the tree, while Wesendorf, barely in time to escape the first of the herd, also swung himself up into a tree beside him.

Even then they were far from safe, for the cattle, blinded by terror, struck the trees as they rolled past, shaking them violently, almost knocking the men from their perches.

"Holy smoke! look yender!" cried Bouncing Bill, his voice barely rising above the wild tumult as the light suddenly came into full view.

A horse, seemingly a mass of fire and sparks, rushed past in chase of the stampeding cattle. From head, withers and hips rose balls of colored fire, exploding with sharp reports. And high over all came that wild, unearthly laughter.

CHAPTER II.

"LITTLE, BUT TOUGH."

"STEADY, Dan! One would take ye fer a tenderfoot at the biz, you go at it so powerful faint-hearted like! You ain't losin' your grip this airy in the day, I hope?"

A cheery, careless tone, ending in a short, reckless burst of laughter as the speaker glanced from the trailing lasso to the face of the man who had failed in his cast.

"Tain't the thing its own self, Kit, fer that's got old long afore this; but I never done a job so nigh home afore, an' it sorter putts the trimbles into a man's muskles to know that some o' his neebors mought be a-peekin' at him jest when he wouldn't like it most. I tole ye it'd be too resky, but you wouldn't hark to me."

"Bah! s'pose they do see? Ain't the hull out-

fit tarred with the same brush? Wouldn't the best of 'em like the same chance, now the hardest part is over with? You didn't squeal last night, when each step mought 'a' brung a bullet to pay fer the keerlessness."

The hang-dog ruffian grinned faintly as he caught the half-mocking glance of those blue eyes.

"I took the longest chaine, like any other fool. Thar was you, sw'arin' red-hot you'd riddle my ole cabeza ef I tuck water, an' I hed to do the job!"

"Then I reckon you'd better consider that oath repeated an' clinched, ole man Dan. Look yer, pard," and the voice of the youngster rung out with a sudden emphasis that was almost fierce; "I'm little, but I'm tough! When I go into a thing I go in head, horns an' all over, the hull porker or not a smell! I've got a reason fer wantin' a powerful sight o' ducats in a hurry, an' in this wooden kentry thar's only one way o' makin' a stake like that. Only long-horns kin do it. Ef a critter ain't got no capital 'cept narve to speckilate onto, he's got to take what chances offers. I tuck the fu'st o' them when I got you out o' that tight box. I done it beca'se I knowed you was up to all the ropes in these parts. You swore you'd do any part o' the work I laid out fer you, without kickin'. An' I swore that at your fu'st sign o' losin' your grip, I'd blow ye so full o' holes your own mammy mought use ye fer a pepper-box without never knowin' no dif'runt."

"You never tole me—"

"I tell ye now, then; an' you'd better pin it fast in the crown o' your hat, whar ye kin see it whenever you say your prayers," was the significant retort.

Like one who deemed he had said enough for all purposes, the young fellow stepped lightly forward, whirled the coils of a pliant lasso about his head, then, with a dexterous jerk, caused the noose to settle over the wide-spreading horns of a steer, sharply snubbing the animal as it attempted to plunge through its startled companions.

His companion moved a little to one side, swinging a lasso for an underhand cast at the hind legs of the steer, but instead of playing his part, he dropped the rope with a sharp cry and rushed to where their horses were secured hard by.

Quick as a frightened cat in his motions, the youth took a double turn of his lasso around a post of the stout-built corral, then leaping to the side of his partner, grasped his arm with one hand, while the other shoved a cocked revolver under his nose.

"Air ye dead boun' to hev it, ye pesky fool?" he grated.

"No—they're comin'—it's the sheriff!" gasped the fellow, shrinking from the grim muzzle and jerking his head toward the timber.

At the same instant Kit caught sight of two horsemen riding rapidly toward them, the beat of their animals' hoofs having been drowned by the trampling of the frightened cattle with which the small corral was pretty well filled.

"So-ho! the sheriff! Not Stewart?" he muttered, lowering his pistol but still holding his cowardly mate tightly.

"No—Wesendorf—cuss the crooked luck!"

"Who's the big critter with him?"

"Ab Gale, o' course. They run in couples, an' whar you find one, you can bet high the other 'ne ain't fur off!"

There was barely time for this rapid interchange of questions and answers, for though the riders jerked up their animals for a moment on catching sight of the two men, they again rapidly advanced, Wesendorf calling out:

"Hello, Dan Masters—back again and hard at work, eh?"

"Hellow yourself an' see how ye like it!" cried Kit, as he stepped into full view, still holding his revolver ready. "Pull up, gents! Ef ye cross the dead line, it's at your own risk!"

Boy though he was, and a stripling as he looked, there was something in that sharp, menacing voice that caused both Wesendorf and Abner Gale to rein in on the instant, though the face of the former flushed hotly with anger.

"You crow mighty loud for a chick that hasn't fairly grown its first pin-feathers, young fellow," he muttered, with an ugly smile. "Do you salute all callers after this style?"

"Ontel I know who they be an' what they want, yes."

"Dan, who is this fellow?"

"Dan's got a gum-bile onto his tongue, an' he's let out the talkin' part o' the biz to me," swiftly interposed Kit. "I'm your mutton, if you want anythin' tickler."

"A black sheep, then, if I don't miss my

guess," laughed the deputy-sheriff, amused by the impudence of the lad, despite himself. "You're brand-burning, I see!"

"You can't prove it," was the swift retort. "An' ef you could, you couldn't git a jury in all Wilbarger to convict a white man fer doin' sech a little thing as that."

Wesendorf laughed again, and now the cloud had entirely vanished from his face.

"Don't tread on our toes, and we'll give you no particular trouble on that score, my friend. The world owes every man a fair living, even if he has to get it by what the straight-laced might call foul means."

"Talk's cheap, but it won't buy whisky," and the youth raised his revolver to half-cock, twirling the cylinder rapidly along the palm of his other hand, casting a quick glance down as though to make sure each chamber was properly loaded. "You may be all right; but I don't know it. This is a country whar they grow bad men from seed, an' ef I be a boy, I've cut my eye-teeth long enough to keep strangers out o' grabbin' reach ontel I know who they be an' what they want. No 'fense gents, but you'll save me a ca'tridge or two ef you keep to your own side o' the dead-line."

Carl Wesendorf gazed curiously at the bold speaker, and this was what he saw:

A slender figure, whose grace and symmetry could not be entirely disguised by the rough, ill-fitting garments with which it was covered. Not more than five feet six inches in height, at the outside, with slender limbs, small hands and feet. His form was erect, his every movement graceful and springy, betokening far more strength and power than would be expected in one of his slight build.

His features were clear-cut and regular in their contour; but there all pretensions to beauty—eyes excepted—came to an end.

His hair was of a fiery red color, thick and coarse, cropped short, a thick fringe of which came almost down to his eyes beneath his regulation white, broad-brimmed "cowboy hat." Over his face were thickly scattered large brown spots rather than freckles, giving him the appearance of one afflicted by some loathsome skin disease. His cheeks were smooth and showed not the slightest trace of beard. His eyes, large and of a deep blue, glowing brightly, keen as those of a hawk, alone kept his face from being absolutely repulsive.

He wore a heavy blue woolen shirt with wide collar, open at the throat, around which was carelessly knotted a silk scarf. Trowsers of buckskin, plain and without any pretense at ornamentation, were held up at his trim waist by a belt containing cartridges and supporting sheaths for a knife and brace of revolvers. Their bottoms were tucked into the riding-boots so dear to the heart of the Western youth who delights in bright colors; red and blue and yellow stars, crescents and scrolls being visible through the black uppers.

Still a boy, so far as could be told from his face and figure, there was something in the bearing of the stranger that warned Carl Wesendorf to handle him carefully.

A single keen, comprehensive glance sufficed the sheriff for all this, and with barely any perceptible pause, he answered the significant threat of the youth:

"You call Dan Masters your pard. He can vouch for us."

Carl Wesendorf flushed a little as Kit answered, with a short laugh:

"Dan isn't jest the model I'd pick out of a crowd fer a angel, stranger, even though you ketch him into the comp'ny of a ginewine chery-bim, jest now. The fu'st glimp' he ketched o' you, he said somethin' 'bout the sheriff."

"I'm a deputy-sheriff for Wilbarger."

"An' you sorter hinted somethin' 'bout brand-burnin'."

"Because I saw that you were trying your hand at it."

"Thar you're off—'way off, stranger," was the cool retort. "Leastways, in the way you mean. That I was sorter warmin' up a critter or two, I don't mind sayin', but it ain't in the way of brand-burnin' you took it to be—not any!"

"The cattle belong to you, then?"—with a smile.

"Sart'in—sence you see 'em in my keepin'."

"Honestly purchased, of course?"

"Bought an' paid fer, too. You don't reckon I'd hev 'em unless they was all co-rect?" with an injured look on his shrewd face that made Wesendorf smile again.

"Not at all, my dear fellow. I think you earned them by hard and neat work. But aren't you taking rather long chances by stopping

so near by? Suppose the driver should stumble onto you here? How then?"

"Look here, mister you feller," slowly uttered the youth, nodding his head sharply at each word, his blue eyes staring boldly into those of the deputy-sheriff. "You've got some pesky sort o' wrinkle into your cabeza that'll make you trouble afore it gits smoothed over, unless you watch your words an' bite 'em off mighty short. You're a big man, no doubt, an' you've got a still bigger to back you up; but mebbe the odds ain't so powerful, a'ter all. I'm little, but I'm tough, an' them that tries me 'll find a hard colt to ride."

"Save your threats until they are needed, my good lad," coolly retorted Wesendorf. "I'm not the man to be scared by the growling of a full-grown dog, much less a puppy with its milk-teeth. Still, I have no cause of quarrel with you."

"So much the better luck yours!"

"Possibly. I know that you are a cattle-thief."

"Go slow, you," grated the lad, his pistol leaping to a level, his blue eyes glowing vividly.

Wesendorf simply smiled as he waved one hand easily.

"I was a witness of your little game last night and I must say you did your work well. Those rockets and Roman candles were an admirable idea, and you ought to take out a patent on it before others adopt your invention."

"You don't look like a fool, but you talk peskily like one. Ef there's any sound sense into ye, let out a little. What trick? When did I play it, an' whar? What on? Durn it all, man, whar're ye tryin' to git through ye, anyhow?"

"Last night; on the overseer of the Dearin ranch and his two assistants; your rigging up a horse with fireworks and heading it into the herd of beef cattle," was the rapid reply of the deputy-sheriff. "You stampeded the herd, followed after and corraled this lot. I know it, for I can recognize the brand from here. And when we came up, you were burning out the old brand, putting on a new one," and he nodded toward the glowing brazier in which were thrust branding-irons.

"Now you're gittin' down to business," said Kit, with a nod of his red head. "But all the same, you're yelpin' on the wrong trail. I don't say all this didn't happen, fer that would be givin' ye the lie, an' I never go that fur unless I'm dead sure I'm in the right. But I do say that I never did the job you think. I'm white, an' honest as the tribe generally pans out. My name's Kit Fox. I'm speckilatin' in live stock, as hefty as my little pile 'll permit. I bought these cattle, an' I kin show the receipt for 'em, signed by the widow Dearin. Dan, yender, kin swar to all I say."

"Pity you haven't a better witness," said Wesendorf, with a grim laugh. "Dan's been a cattle-thief ever since he was weaned, and no man who has known him for a week would take his Bible oath without plenty of corroborating proof."

"I didn't ax you to take it," bluntly. "Thar's the dockiment that talks fer itself."

Still holding his revolver in one hand, Kit Fox strode forward and handed the deputy-sheriff a paper. Not a little to his surprise, Wesendorf found it was a receipt, made out in regular form, and signed by Martha J. Dearin, acknowledging the payment of a certain sum of money for a lot of cattle.

"What are you burning for, then?" he demanded, shortly.

"Ef I was brung up polite, I'd say none o' your durn business! Sense I wasn't, I don't mind tellin' you jest so much: I've lost nigh one-hafe the stock I paid fer sense crossin' the line o' this cussed county. To keep from losin' the rest, I 'cluded to try a trick o' my own 'vention. Dog don't eat dog, they say, an' thieves don't tackle thieves. Savey?"

Ever since the name of widow Dearin was mentioned, Abner Gale seemed uneasy, and now he muttered:

"Le's pull out! What matter? Ef he's straight, you can't tetch him, an' ef he's crooked, you don't want to."

Wesendorf flushed a trifle as he caught the quick glance which Kit Fox shot into his face at this observation, and with a scowl he shook off the trembling hand of the drunkard.

"Your papers seem to be regular enough, but you must admit that it looked rather dubious. A drove of the Dearin cattle was driven off last night. To-day we find you, a stranger, in company with an old hand at the business, defacing the Dearin brand."

"As the cheapest way o' 'surin' my stock ag'inst the pesky thieves which you, as sheriff, ort to run out," was the keen retort. "I don't ax you to take my word. Ef you think me crooked, 'rest me—ef you know how!"

"It wouldn't be such a difficult job, I fancy!"

"Not ef you bring a rijiment fer backin'.

No one, nur yit two men, can't take me when I know I'm in the right."

Cool and resolute, his blue eyes meeting the angry gaze of the officer, Kit Fox stood at ease, yet clearly on the alert for any hostile movement. Only for a brief space, then the lad turned carelessly away, speaking sharply to his partner:

"Inside an' throw that critter, ole man. We've lost time enough foolin' with bags o' wind. Lively—you savey?"

With a side glance toward the flushed sheriff, Masters obeyed, deftly entangling the hind feet of the enraged steer. It was quickly overthrown, the lassoes being secured so as to prevent its rising until the work was completed. Then the red-hot irons were taken from the brazier and passed over the peculiar-looking brand which marked the hip of the bellowing steer, and a different mark placed near by. This done, the ropes were deftly removed, and the brand-burners darted nimbly out of reach as the steer rose to its feet.

It was the pick of the herd, now mad with pain and terror, a bloody foam dropping from its muzzle as it glared about. Then, with a fierce bellow, it lowered its long horns and made a rush at Kit Fox. He leaped nimbly aside, the armed head struck the bars with such force that they gave way. With a wild snort, the crazed animal darted away, then—a cry of horror broke from the lips of Abner Gale.

"Wilda—my darling! God in heaven look down and save her!" he gasped, reeling until he fell from the saddle.

CHAPTER III.

TEMPTER AND TEMPTED.

A LITTLE earlier, on that same day, two horsemen were passing over a level, prairie-like tract of ground, not many miles distant from the corral where Kit Fox was to try his hand at brand-burning.

Both riders were young, the eldest having but recently celebrated his majority, while his companion was nearly two years younger than that. Both were well mounted, well clad and well armed—the last as a matter of course in "Wicked Wilbarger." Both were tall, athletic and good horsemen; each one was what most people would call a fine-looking young fellow, if not positively handsome; but there the semblance between the twain came to an end.

Ernest Gale was almost as dark as an Indian, with the heavy, straight black hair which marked his father; with his large, restless eyes, black as polished ebony. And, sad to see in one so youthful, there was a still further resemblance, in the bleared and bloodshot appearance which tells so unmistakably of hard and constant drinking. From this, as well as his flushed face and thickened utterance, it was clear that the youth had been "on a spree" the night before, and was still suffering from the effects.

His dress was fine in material and almost foppish in its cut for a frontier region. A belt of woven silk encircled his waist, supporting knife and revolvers, while now and then a sudden movement in his saddle would afford a glimpse of a gleaming point of metal amid the elaborate ruffles of his shirt-bosom. It was the haft of a small but stout and serviceable double-edged dagger.

Even as Ernest Gale bore a striking resemblance to Abner of the same name, his father, so did Victor Wesendorf resemble the worthy deputy-sheriff for Wilbarger, though in a less degree. He was a "revised edition" of the doughty Carl. He was handsomer, better shaped and proportioned, his figure being an almost perfect model of athletic grace and power. Only a shade under six feet in height, he carried his one hundred and eighty pounds of bone, blood and muscle with a lightness that told how little extra fat or flesh he was burdened with.

Fine, yellow hair fell in curling locks to his broad shoulders. A silken mustache shaded his upper lip, matched by a narrow, pointed imperial on his rounded chin. His complexion was pink and white, fair as that of a lady. His eyes were blue, large and brilliant. His lips shone red as though freshly painted, and as he laughed his even teeth gleamed whitely.

His garb was more nearly that of a Mexican ranchero than aught else, the brilliant hues and graceful "set" of the garments proving very becoming to the handsome athlete.

Like Ernest Gale, Victor Wesendorf was thoroughly armed, but his tools were richer and more highly ornamented than those borne by his comrade.

"It's a long time between drinks, as the governor—"

"No more, Vic," hastily uttered young Gale, averting his face as Wesendorf produced a silver-mounted flask, shaking it until its contents gave a musical gurgle. "I've had too much now. I'm almost ashamed to go home as it is."

"That's because it's working off," was the light retort. "Take a hair of the dog that bit you, man! You're losing your grip of late days. Why, only last night I overheard one of the girls asking when you intended entering the ministry, you were so sober and dignified."

"That won't wash, Vic. You know I was drunk as a loon. I haven't seen a sober day for six mouths past. I came by the taste for whisky honestly, as the whole neighborhood knows; but sometimes I half-believe that only for you I would not be nearly so bad. You have such a cursed coaxing way about you that you wind me around your finger without my fairly knowing how you manage it!"

"The cure's in your own hands then," a little sharply retorted Wesendorf, his cheeks flushing, an ominous glitter coming into his eyes. "If you don't like my company—"

Young Gale turned impulsively toward him, one hand touching his arm, his voice very earnest as he spoke:

"I didn't mean that, old fellow. I couldn't get along without you, now; it would be like losing my right hand."

"It would come still harder on me, pard," as their hands met in a close pressure. "You have others—Wilda, for one—to fall back on, while I am all alone. Bah! we are growing sentimental. Take a drink and drown it out!"

With a red flush, Ernest Gale complied, then said, with a short laugh that was more shame than mirth:

"You see! I am like wax in your hands, Vic! All the morning I have been mentally swearing off, yet at a word from you, all my good resolutions take to themselves wings and fly away."

"Are you sure they are good resolutions?"

"They would be, if I could only keep them," with sudden soberness. "Vic, old fellow, you don't know how far along I have got. Last night is not the first time I have begun to fancy there were snakes crawling in my boots. I know the symptoms—I've watched them in the old man often enough, of late. And I tell you it won't take many more such 'tears' to give me a select menagerie of my own!"

"Nonsense, old fellow! You're in the dumps, now, and your brain is feverish for want of a good long sleep. I don't believe you've closed your winkers since we left for Vernon—and that's two weeks to-morrow! Enough to shake up any man, let alone one as sensitive as you. As for the menagerie, you mustn't let the idle talk of envious fools disturb you. If I knew the dirty gossip that told you, I'd—"

"Told me what?" demanded Gale, grasping his arm with a sudden fierceness. "Who's dared talk about me?"

"I didn't mean—I fancied you had heard—"

"What?" still more sharply demanded the youth, his black eyes glittering vividly. "You've said too much to stop short at that, pard. What have they been, saying about me? Who says?"

"Cal Taylor, among others."

"The sneaking cur!" and the red light in his eyes grew even more intense. "What did he say, and when?"

"I could kick myself for letting the word drop!" growled Wesendorf, biting his lip until the red blood started through the thin skin. "I didn't think—and yet, you have a right to know, as her brother."

"Calvin Taylor—and about Wilda? Now you've got to spit it out, Vic, or we'll quarrel! What did he say?"

"If you will have it, all right," with a short, hard laugh. "He said that it would be a happy day for all decent folks when you drank yourself into the grave."

"What else? What about Wilda?" persisted Ernest.

"That he meant to have her, by fair means or foul; that she favored his suit, and that if you tried to interfere, he'd wear you out on the ground."

"You heard him say this, and never called him to account? You have kept it hidden even from me?"

Victor Wesendorf flushed and his eyes fell be-

fore that hot, indignant gaze, but his voice was steady enough as he said:

"I did not hear him say it, though the report comes from one in whose truth I can fully rely. I would have taken it up, at once, but what excuse could I offer? You know how Wilda has treated me. She declined my offer, and even forbade my entering her presence again."

"I know. Cal Taylor has poisoned her mind toward you, no doubt—curse him! But I'll take it up and make him eat his words! I'll fill him so full of holes that—"

"No, you won't, old fellow!" cried Wesendorf, catching the impulsive youth by the arm as he wheeled his horse to dash away toward the Taylor farm. "That would only bring a rope around your own neck, and scandalize your sister, for then the whole truth must come out."

"Hands off, Vic, or I'll strike you!" grated the liquor-crazed youth, struggling to free himself. "Shall the foul-mouthed cur go unwhipped of justice? I'll kill him!"

"Better still; give him a sound licking—spoil his good looks and make him sign a confession—make him swear to cease visiting Wilda. Show the paper to her, and I'm way off in my guess if she ever looks at the coward again."

"I'll do it! Come on!"

"I'll see you through with it, never fear, old fellow!" said Wesendorf, a cruel smile curling his lip as his face was momentarily averted. "But there's no great rush. Taylor is sure to be at home to-day, for this evening is the one he takes for calling on Wilda."

"He'll go on crutches, if at all!"

"Or you and I both will."

"You lost your chance, old fellow," said Ernest, with a half-frown. "You mustn't interfere now. He's my meat."

"I'll keep hands off, unless he should chance to get the best of you. Not but that you're the better man," hastily, as a hot flush colored the dark skin of his comrade. "I know you can handle him easily, when in good fettle; but you've just come off a heavy racket, and are hardly yourself."

"I will be, by the time we find that cur. Give me your flask. Mine's empty."

The poison was in his hands almost ere the words crossed his lips, and Ernest only lowered the flask when the last drop was poured down his throat. Then, his eyes glowing, his face flushed, his tongue running nimbly, he dashed on in the lead, followed by the coldly smiling plotter whom he called friend.

A worse friend mortal could scarcely have found by raking the whole world over.

Enough has been said to show that he was a rejected suitor for the hand and heart of young Gale's sister, Wilda. He had the best wishes of Ernest, and the sullen permission of the father, while the broken-spirited mother remained in meek neutrality. But with all this in his favor, the handsome rascal failed to make the desired impression on the fair Wilda. She felt, rather than knew, that he was bad to the very core. She knew that his influence over her weak-willed brother was evil, and when Victor begged her to become his, her reply was too plain and pointed for even him to mistake.

That was nearly a year before our story opens, but Victor had not abandoned hopes of ultimately gaining his wishes. He enlisted the cordial aid of his father, and between them all of the Gale family save Wilda herself were gained as allies. Still the maiden remained scornfully obdurate, and Victor was not long in discovering one important reason.

This assumed the shape of Calvin Taylor, only son of a worthy widow, who had a farm a few miles distant from the homes of Gale and Wesendorf. Calvin was a fine-looking young fellow, honest as the day is long, with but one great fault. He possessed a fiery temper, which was only too readily aroused, but almost impossible to quell when once the bonds were broken.

The liquor swallowed so freely acted like a tonic on Ernest Gale, and the jaded youth was almost fiercely gay while riding rapidly toward the Taylor farm. Wesendorf was well content, knowing his man so thoroughly. If he met Calvin Taylor face to face that day, a fight must follow.

"There's the fellow now!" he exclaimed, as they came in sight of the farm, though the house itself was hidden from view behind a distant grove. "He couldn't be in a better place, for if he tries to run, you can catch him up easily."

"Say, you—come out here!" cried Gale, as Taylor looked up from his work at the sound of their horses' hoofs.

Even at that distance the hot flush called up by this insolent address could be seen, and the

young farmer took one swift stride toward them, pausing, however, as he recognized who they were, one hand mechanically falling to his waist. He was wholly unarmed, however, and hesitated.

"If you're afraid to face a man why don't you turn tail and run?" added Gale, with a taunting laugh.

His face flushing still deeper, Taylor strode up to the portion of fence nearest the horsemen, saying, in deep tones:

"I'm no coward, even if I am unarmed, and you two to one, Mr. Gale. What do you want with me?"

"To make a half-way decent man of you, by thumping some of the lies out of your carcass!" fiercely cried the young man, throwing his reins to Victor and leaping to the ground.

Quick as thought Calvin Taylor wrenched loose a stout bit of fencing, crying, sharply:

"I don't want to hurt you, Ernest Gale, but you mustn't crowd me too hard! Keep your own side of the line, please."

"Hold hard, both of you!" shouted Wesendorf, leaping to the ground and catching hold of his friend. "If you must fight, set about it like gentlemen."

"He don't know what the word means—the foul-mouthed slanderer!" cried Gale, bitterly, but yielding to the force of his comrade. "There's no fight in him!"

"I don't want to fight you, Ernest Gale," said Taylor, his face white with an emotion he could not conceal. "I'd rather lose a hand than to harm one hair of your head, for her sake!"

"Look out, you cur!" grated the infuriated youth, his eyes glowing with hatred. "Don't bring her name into this, or I'll scatter your brains over the whole field!"

"That would prove your manhood, as I am unarmed," retorted Taylor, casting aside the strip of board and folding his arms tightly over his heaving chest. "Shoot, if you dare soil your hands after that fashion!"

"That excuse shan't save your bones, my fine fellow!" cried Gale, showing his teeth as he unbuckled his belt of arms and cast them aside.

"Come over that fence, if you are not as great a cur as you are liar!"

Taylor made an impulsive motion to comply, but checked himself.

"I have no cause of quarrel with you, Mr. Gale," he said, his tones hoarse and strained, betraying the difficulty he had in restraining his temper. "Go your way now, and when you are sober I'll be glad to see you. Just now you're too drunk—"

A short, insulting laugh broke from the lips of Victor Wesendorf as he caught his friend by the arm, saying:

"Come, lad, let's go. If he pleads the baby act you'd get no credit for thrashing him. Let the craven alone!"

"I'll not forget those words, Victor Wesendorf!" sternly cried Taylor, great veins swelling on his temples. "If you'll wait until I can run to the house for my tools, I'll cram the dirty lie down your dirtier gullet!"

Ernest turned upon his comrade with a fierce scowl.

"Drop that, Vic! He's my meat, and if you interfere, you've got to take me too! As for you, Cal Taylor, listen: I came here to lick you out of your boots, and I'm bound to do it. If you are too big a coward to face me like a man, I'll wear my whip out over your shoulders as you run—I swear it!"

"Now you listen, Ernest Gale," said Taylor, his voice trembling with hardly repressed emotion. "I can take more from you than from any other man in this wide world. I will not strike you if I can help it, but even you must not crowd me too hard. There's a limit even to my forbearance."

"Will that reach the limit?"

As he grated forth these words, Ernest leaped lightly forward and struck twice with open palms, first on one cheek and then on the other, leaping back with a taunting laugh.

The blows were too light to cause physical pain, but the hot tears of angry shame came into the eyes of the farmer as he started back, his face white as that of a corpse.

"Lend me your quirt, Vic!" cried Gale, laughing hoarsely as he misinterpreted this movement. "The cowardly cur is running away! By the Lord that made me! I'll cut his back to ribbons, and write craven between every stripe!"

But Wesendorf knew the man better, evading the grasp.

"He'll fight now. On guard, boy!"

With a light bound, Calvin Taylor crossed the fence, holding up one open hand as Ernest moved toward him, and said:

"Yes, I'll fight. If any other man treated me as you have done, I'd tear his heart out and eat it hot! For her sake, I'll spare you more than a sound thrashing."

"Or take one!" sneered Wesendorf.

"Not unless you double-bank me, and even, then it's no dead sure thing," said Taylor, coolly, stripping to the waist.

"If he touches you—if you lift a finger, Victor, before one or the other of us cries enough, I'll shoot you like a dog!" cried Ernest, aiming savagely as he turned toward him.

By way of answer, Wesendorf turned away, hanging his arms on a fence post, then retreating to where the horses stood.

"Now go in—and may the best man win!" he cried, as his blue eyes glistened like those of a snake.

Instantly the two young men confronted each other, their guards up, seemingly forgetful of all else. Taylor was cooler than his adversary, though this was only outwardly.

Gale, crazed by liquor, feverish from his protracted debauch, was too hot-headed to do his powers full justice, though his preliminary sparring betokened a fair degree of science.

This is not a chronicle of the prize-ring, and it is not my purpose to give a detailed account of the disgraceful affair, which would not have been alluded to at all, only for the great influence it had on other characters in this story.

For several minutes the battle was about equal, though the unshattered constitution of the young farmer caused him to labor less and show the punishment in a slighter degree. But then, feeling his powers giving way, Gale rushed to a close, and after a desperate struggle, the men fell side by side.

With a swift twist, Taylor turned his antagonist, and holding him down, sternly bade him acknowledge himself whipped.

For answer Gale writhed partially free, the men rolling over and over as they strove for the mastery. Then they came against the fence with a heavy shock, and with a sharp cry, the desperate grasp of Taylor partially slackened. His head had struck upon a stone at the foot of one of the posts.

With a panting snarl, Gale improved the opportunity, turning his adversary, kneeling over him, tearing at his throat like a wild beast. Then—just how it came about, he could not have told in his insane fury—a frightful groan broke from the lips of Taylor, and Ernest Gale staggered to his feet, his hands covered with blood. And a dagger was buried in the bosom of the young farmer, sunk to its very hilt!

CHAPTER IV.

WRITHING IN THE TOILS.

"MAN alive! what have you done now?"

Ernest Gale partly turned his body toward Victor Wesendorf as that sharp, startled cry came to his ears, but his eyes were held by that dreadful sight like one fascinated.

He saw the red rays of the sun glimmering on the polished haft of the dagger, and saw the red blood bubbling up around it as the broad bosom heaved tremulously for an instant, then sink and remain motionless as death.

Victor Wesendorf sprang hastily past the shrinking figure, kneeling beside the young farmer, strong anxiety written on his every feature. He gazed keenly into the open, upturned eyes. He bent his ear to the bare bosom, then raised it with a swift glance toward his comrade. His hand trembled slightly as he grasped the ornamental haft of the dagger and drew the crimsoned blade forth. A gush of blood followed, but Victor hastily drew back, and not a drop soiled his hand or clothes.

"It's no use," he muttered, moving slowly to where Ernest Gale still stood like one under the influence of some horrible spell. "The steel touched his heart. He never knew what hurt him—poor devil!"

"Not dead? Don't say that, Vic—don't!" huskily muttered the young man.

"It's the truth. He's done with this world. A sad affair—sad as dangerous, old fellow!"

"How did it happen? Who could have done it?" stammered Ernest, shuddering, but yet unable to wholly avert his gaze from what had so lately been a man in all the glory of life and strength. "I don't understand how—Merciful Heaven!"

The last words came in hoarse, gasping accents as Victor Wesendorf suddenly held the fatal weapon up before his eyes. He recognized his own favorite weapon—the dagger which he habitually carried in his bosom!

"No—I never—I threw it aside before we

fought!" he managed to utter, but shrinking further back and raising one bloody hand to shut out his view of that silent witness. "You know that, Vic. You saw me disarm. You can swear that I never struck him with anything worse than my fist. I never killed him! He ain't dead! He's only pretending, to frighten me! Get up, Cal! Shake hands, and say it was a fair fight!"

Like one drawn on by an irresistible power, the half-crazed youth moved slowly toward the motionless body, uttering those husky sentences in barely articulate tones. He stooped and took one of the hands in his own—but flung it aside on the instant with a shuddering groan of fear and grief, turning as though to seek safety in flight.

"Hold, Ernest!" cried Wesendorf, grasping him by the arm and checking his mad flight. "It's a terrible affair, but it's done, and can't be undone now. We must act with care, or there will follow another tragedy."

"They'll hang me—and yet I swear I never killed him!"

"So will I, if needs be, old fellow," said Wesendorf, in soothing tones, as he led his trembling comrade back to the horses, taking a capacious flask of liquor from his saddle-bags. "Drink—you must!" as Gale shrunk away with a shudder of momentary loathing. "You've got to get back your nerve by some means, or your face will betray all to the first soul we happen to meet. Drink, and drink deep—that's it!"

Though the first swallow of the accursed stuff seemed to choke him, that sensation was but momentary, and then it was Victor who lowered the flask by main force.

"Not too much, old man," with a short, hard laugh. "You don't want to get drunk until this affair is smoothed over."

"But it was a fair fight, Vic—you know that!" muttered Gale, casting a swift, shuddering glance toward that bloody figure, then hastily averting his eyes. "I didn't stab him! They can't hang a man—Curse you, Vic Wesendorf!" with a sudden access of desperate fury, "what made you coax me here and egg me on to making him fight? If anybody deserves death for this deed, it is you—you, I say!"

The heavy hand of the blonde athlete fell upon his arm, and those glittering blue eyes stared him full in the face. There was a cold, hard menace in the tones which pronounced:

"Be careful, Ernest Gale. I alone can save your life when his body is discovered. Unless you want to cut your own throat, you will not make me your enemy."

"I didn't mean it, Vic. God help me! I don't know what I'm saying! I can't think—can't see anything but—Take me away from this, pard, and help drive back the devil that's hissing in my ears for me to shout aloud—It's a lie!" with a sudden fierceness, as he flung back his long, black hair, glaring around with a pitiful defiance. "I never killed him! It's not my dagger! The devil stole it from me—I never saw it before!"

A look of startled fear came into the face of Victor Wesendorf at this fierce outburst, for its contradictory ravings alarmed him. It was no part of his wishes that Ernest Gale should die for murder, though friendship had but little to do with that desire to save him from justice. Ernest Gale dead would be of no use to him; alive, and under the shadow of that terrible deed, he might be very valuable.

He grasped the crazed youth firmly, and held the liquor flask to his lips. Ernest drank freely, and when the bottle was withdrawn a gasping sigh followed it. That wild look partially fled from his bloodshot eyes, and the nervous rage gave place to another fit of trembling.

"Keep quiet now. Don't look this way. Wait until I come back to you," said Wesendorf, speaking sternly, as he turned his comrade's back to the body.

With a swift but comprehensive glance all around, to make sure that no one was within sight, Victor glided to the spot where Calvin Taylor lay in a pool of blood. Once more he bent over him and carefully examined the body for some traces of lingering life. There were none, and with a long-drawn breath of relief he arose, taking a second long look around. Still he could discover no one, and stooping again he carefully wiped the bloody dagger on the trousers of the fallen farmer.

It was a lonely spot, some distance from any road or traveled track. The fight had taken place in a little depression and at the rear end of the quite extensive farm. Unless stumbled

on by accident, the body might lie there for hours, for days even.

The soil was hard at that spot, and but few marks had been made even by the hoofs of the horses. With his foot Victor hastily marred these, then resumed his belt of arms, picking up those belonging to Gale, together with his discarded clothing.

"Put these on, old fellow!" he hurriedly muttered, aiding the almost stupefied youth as he spoke. "Brace up, and be a man. Follow my instructions, and all will go well yet. No one has seen us since we left Vernon. There is no peculiarity about the marks of our nags. We can break the trail and get into the main road without discovery. Then, who shall say that either of us had a finger in this pie?"

Ernest Gale made no reply as he hurried on his clothes and buckled his belt around him. But when Victor handed him the now bright and shining dagger he shrunk away and covered his eyes with his bloody hands.

"Throw it away—destroy the cursed tool!" he gasped.

Almost savagely Wesendorf gripped his arm. "Look here, you fool!" he grated, jerking the trembling wretch around and staring him full in the eyes. "Do you want me to throw you over for good and all? Shall I leave you to get your neck out of the noose of the lynchers by your own wits? If not, pay attention."

"If that bit of steel was found anywhere near here, it would twist the rope for your throat! Everybody in Wilbarger can swear to it, and to who owns it. You must take it, and hang on to it tightly. You must fight against this craven fear—why, man, one glimpse into your face as it is now, would make a natural born idiot suspect you of having committed some terrible crime!"

"But I didn't—you know I didn't, Vic!"

"I know nothing of the sort," was the stern retort. "I will swear falsely for you to others, but there need be no lying between you and I. You did kill Calvin Taylor, and I saw you strike the blow!"

Ernest Gale was his own worst enemy. With different surroundings and less temptations to meet, he might have been an honor to his race. His heart was in the right spot. He was generous, frank, truthful, but woefully weak and easily influenced by those whom he deemed his friends. With all his poor soul he loved Victor Wesendorf, and followed his evil lead almost without a struggle, until he was so completely in the toils that escape was impossible. Strong drink and wild excesses had still further weakened his will, until now he was a wreck and only a frail reed in the hands of his false friend, who bent and swayed him to suit his own base ends.

He took the dagger and thrust it into the hidden sheath beneath his vest. He climbed into the saddle and silently followed Victor Wesendorf, who carefully selected a route by which the least possible sign might be left behind them.

Favored by the lay of the land, and knowing every foot of ground for miles around, Victor finally struck the hard, traveled road without leaving more than the shadow of a trail, which he believed would be entirely obliterated by the storm which had threatened for several days past.

But few words passed between the two men until after the trail was broken and they entered the main road.

The long ride served to partially restore the young man's composure, and seeing this, Victor believed it was time for him to speak out plainly.

"So far so good, old fellow!" he suddenly exclaimed, with a long breath. "No one has seen us. I doubt if the best scout in all Texas could pick out our trail. Only for these beauty-marks on your face I would not give a dollar to any one to insure our necks."

"Am I marked so plainly?"

"Plain enough to show that you have been in a fight, or else received a mighty rough tumble from the saddle. We must be ready to swear that it came from the last. It will not be so difficult to make people believe that," with a meaning laugh that caused the cheeks of the drunkard to flush.

"You're the last one on earth who had ought to taunt me with that weakness, Vic! Only for you—"

"Only for me you would hang before another noon!" sharply, brutally, interposed Wesendorf, adding, as the poor wretch shrunk as if from a blow: "If I speak out plainly it's for your own good, lad. You want the spur to rouse you up, and I'm playing the part of a true friend in applying that stimulus."

"But it cuts—it cuts to the very core, Victor!"

"The surer the cure, then. Look here, pard. You're taking the surest course to spoil all my efforts in your behalf. You must brace up, or your own face will convict you when the body is discovered. At the very best there will be ugly hints and ugly whisperings, for all Wilbarger knows you had little love for the fellow. It will take nerve to carry you through without stretching hemp."

"Not that—not that!" muttered Gale, striving to cast off the terrible incubus that fettered his mind. "At the very worst, they could only call it manslaughter."

"In justice, perhaps, but not so with lynch law. It would be the rope, for my neck as well as yours. I'm willing to lie, and do anything in reason to save you, old fellow, if you'll only play your part as I mark it out for you. I'll stand by you until the very last, should the worst come to pass, but—"

"You would desert me then? You would hang me to save yourself?" sharply cried Gale, his eyes flashing vividly.

"Not until I saw that your fate was sealed beyond all hope of escape," was the cool response. "Don't be a fool, man. What would it serve you for me to hang in your company, when no stain of his blood rests on my hand? That would be folly."

A sudden energy came into the voice of the other, and his eyes shone with an old-time fire as he spoke again:

"In the sight of Heaven, Victor Wesendorf, you are to the full as guilty as I am! You plied me with liquor. You poured those lying tales into my ears, and urged me on to meet the poor fellow, when you knew that a fight must follow!"

"Granted," with a cold laugh. "I told you the truth. I went with you, resolved to thrash Calvin Taylor in case he should prove too heavy for you. But I didn't stab him!"

"Nor did I!" cried Ernest, but his voice was lower and that old trembling shook his frame once more. "I don't believe I did. How could I? I took off all my weapons—I can almost swear I flung away that dagger with the rest!"

"But not quite, without committing perjury, pard," was the deliberate retort. "I forgot it at the time, or I should have insisted on your removing that, as well. I never remembered the ugly little tool, until I saw it flash in the sunlight as you turned Taylor over. I cried out, but before I could take even a single step toward you, the deed was done."

"You swear that—swear it as between man and man?"

"By all the powers in heaven and hell, if you wish!"

"God knows I would not have done it, had I been in my right mind," groaned the poor wretch, his head bowing. "I only wish I could swap places with poor Cal this moment!"

"But you can't. The deed is done, and can't be mended now. We've got to make the best of it."

What we've got to do is to prove an *alibi*. It can be done, if you will keep shady until dark, when we'll see about that face of yours. I must tell the old man—"

"Never! he would let it out in his mad rage!"

"I mean *my* father, not *yours*, lad. He thinks a powerful sight of you, and I can twist him around my little finger. He will help us out, and for friendship's sake stand between you and any talk of lynching. As sheriff, and one of the chief men in the B. B.'s, he can do what he likes. Even if not for your sake, he would for *hers*—for Wilda."

A painful groan came from the bruised lips.

"She must never know, Vic—she nor mother. It would kill them! Bad as I am, they love me. They must never know!"

"That of course. But you must brace up a bit, pard, or they will read the truth in your face the first time they set eyes on it. Curse it, man!" with sudden heat. "I can't do it all by myself! You've got to play your part, or I might as well come out with the plain truth first as last!"

"The cursed drink has eaten away all my nerve. I'm like a leaf in the wind. And then—Ha!" with sudden energy, as he jerked up his horse, staring down the road. "There's somebody riding this way! It's Wilda! I can't meet her now! Stop her, Vic, and say something—anything—"

"You lost something on the road, and turned back to find it before we saw her," hastily uttered Wesendorf. "If she don't recognize you, and speak of it, I'll let her think it another."

Without another word, Ernest Gale turned and fled—fled from his sister, the one being whom he loved best in the world.

CHAPTER V.

"A WEDDING OR A HANGING!"

ONLY a single glance did Victor Wesendorf cast after his hastily-fleeing friend, then he turned again to the fairer vision in front.

Only a few hundred yards away, where the road curved through the timbers, a woman on horseback came into view. Thanks to a break Gale had caught sight of and recognized the rider as his sister, of whom frequent mention has been made.

It was clear that she had made the same discovery, now, from the abrupt manner in which she checked her horse, gazing after the flying youth.

"I'll do it!" muttered Victor, beneath his breath, his eyes filling with a desperate light as he recognized the one being whom he loved better than his own self. "It must come to that before—"

A motion on the part of the fair rider, as though to turn her spirited horse and beat a retreat, cut his mutterings short, and Wesendorf raised one hand with a beckoning gesture as he touched spurs to ribs and dashed forward.

"She's half a mind to run for it, even now! Only for having recognized Ernest, she'd give me the cut direct! Wait a bit, my lady! You've had your fling, and it's my turn, now!"

Victor Wesendorf was right in his suspicions. Wilda Gale was more than half-tempted to turn her horse and flee as though a veritable imp of evil had crossed her path. She would have done so, had she not recognized the figure of her wild but dearly-loved brother in that hastily-retreating rider. Surely he must have seen her? And he had been gone from home two long weeks. Could it be—

Her fair cheeks flushed brightly with shame, not for herself, as she divined a reason for this strange conduct. She was not blind to the faults of her brother. They had caused her many a sore heart, many an hour of tearful prayer and pleading before the throne of grace. Scores of times the poor, weak boy had promised her to reform, to never again touch the poison that made of him something lower than the brutes; only to crush her new-born hopes by his own shameful fall.

She was forced to believe that Ernest had once more yielded to the degraded appetite he inherited from his father, and had fled rather than face her while under the influence of liquor. And there was a light in her dark eyes that boded ill for the hopes of Victor Wesendorf as she awaited his approach, for, woman-like, she blamed him alone for the fall of her brother.

Wilda Gale "took after her mother," rather than her other relatives. They were built on a large scale; she was small in every respect save spirit and mind and heart. They were dark, Indian-like; she was fair, her eyes gray, her hair a golden nut-brown, her complexion a pure creamy-white, tinged on the cheeks with rose, seeming proof against the ravages of wind and sun, for certainly she did not especially avoid either.

Under the average height of her sex, she was so perfectly formed, her person so justly rounded and developed, her face so charming, her eyes so bright and speaking, that few who beheld her could remember aught of the rules or standards by which it is customary to judge woman's beauty. Just then she was the standard, and one which could not be improved upon.

"Was that Ernest who just left you, Mr. Wesendorf?" Wilda called out, just a little sharply, as the young man drew near.

"Yes; he forgot something at the Millican Springs, and rode back after it," was the cool reply.

"He might have waited for me!"

"No doubt he would, had he seen you in time. I did not recognize you until after he had ridden away."

"I can overtake him, and—"

An indignant cry broke off the sentence as, on attempting to pass by Victor, her bridle-rein was grasped by a firm hand, causing her spirited animal to sink back on its haunches.

"How dare you, sir?" she panted, lifting her riding-whip as though to cut him across the face.

"I'd dare even more than that for your sake, Wilda!" he uttered, his blue eyes glowing, his cheeks flushed. "And it is for your sake that I check you from following poor Ernest."

The proud, indignant light faded from her eyes: her red lips quivered as they blanched; her cheeks grew less rosy; for she could not mistake the meaning he sought to convey.

"If it is poor Ernest, you are the one to be blamed, Victor Wesendorf! Heaven forgive me if I wrong you; but I believe you are leading

him to ruin as the shortest, surest method of punishing me for rejecting your love!"

A short, hard laugh greeted this speech.

"You're frank, and I'm glad of it, my dear girl; for now you can't blame me if I follow the same lead. You're right—so far, at least, as the boy is concerned. He's drunk—so drunk that he did not care to meet even you just now."

"And all through your evil influence!" passionately.

"Have it thus if you will, pretty—"

"Stop!" and the little whip quivered before his eyes. "You insult me at your peril!"

"The truth should never be taken as an insult, Miss Gale. You are pretty—lovely as a dream—and it is no sin to say so," he coolly replied.

"Coming from your lips it is an insult. Release my rein and let me follow my brother."

"He begged me to intercept you, and give him time to make his escape. I promised him I would, and I never break my word."

"If that was only true!" exclaimed Wilda, tears dimming the brightness of her eyes, her voice faltering with strong emotion as her uplifted hand sunk to her lap. "If you had never broken the sacred pledge you once made me! You swore that you would not lead poor brother into temptation—that you would use all of your influence to break him of that dreadful habit! And now—you have led him into temptation again! You have—I know it!" with suddenly renewed energy. "You can lead him with a gossamer thread. He loves you, and you have taken the basest advantage of that love. Before he fell under your evil influence, he was one of whom the highest in all the land might be proud! And now—a poor degraded wretch who flees from the sight of his sister!"

"You give me too much credit, Miss Gale."

"At your door, and the door of your no less evil father, lies the sin. You have made him a drunkard; but were he ten times as low, still he would be as far above you and Carl Wesendorf as heaven is above earth! If weak, he is no criminal, thank God!"

"You are quite sure of that?" with a low laugh.

Wilda gazed keenly into his glowing eyes for a moment, her flushed cheeks paling; but only for a brief space. Then her voice rung out indignantly, scornfully:

"Even you have not the sublime impudence to charge him with being worse than weak. That he is, I admit, dearly as I love him, or he would never yield to your evil counsel. It is that which has made him drink so frequently, and—"

"Give the devil his due, Miss Gale! You forget your and his father. I believe he takes a drink, now and then?"

It was a brutal speech, though so softly uttered, and the poor girl felt it most acutely. For a little she cowered beneath it, but then her proud spirit reasserted itself and she confronted him boldly.

"That is one more deadly sin for which you and your father will have to answer! Who ever saw father the worse for drink before he became intimate with Carl Wesendorf? Where could you find a happier home than was ours in those days? Who was brighter, more cheerful than poor mother? Who more noble and true than Ernest? And now—thanks to you and your no less evil father—she is broken down, dying long before her time! He is a mere wreck of what he was then! And father—the change in him is even more dreadful!"

"Hard words, Miss Gale," said Wesendorf, with an affected yawn, poorly disguised by the white hand that rose to his lips. "But we didn't make him a criminal."

"You lie in your throat, Victor Wesendorf!" with sudden fury, her eyes flashing, her lithe figure drawn proudly erect. "My father is no brand-burner!"

"Did I say he was, my dear?" with uplifted eyebrows.

"You said he was a criminal!"

"I mentioned no names. I may have meant Ernest."

With a dexterous movement he placed his horse alongside the one Wilda rode, but facing in opposite directions, and caught both her hands in his, holding her helpless despite the desperate effort she made to free herself.

"Unhand me, you scoundrel!" she panted.

"When you have heard what I have to say, not before," he replied, his voice hard and strained, his eyes glowing wickedly. "You have had your fling; it is my turn now; and before we part company this day, there shall be a full and frank understanding between you and I."

"Dastard! this insult shall be bitterly avenged!"

"I have counted the cost, and am prepared to pay the penalty if one is required," was the cold retort. "Wilda Gale, I need not tell you how long and ardently I have loved you. From the day we first met I inwardly vowed to never give over the chase until you were my wife. For your sake I could have kept my record clean. I could have proved a true and faithful friend to you and yours. I could have weaned Ernest from his drinking, for, as you say, my influence over him is powerful."

"And instead you have bent all your energies to dragging him still deeper into the depths!" with a sobbing accent.

"Thanks to you, my lady!" with a grim smile. "You flouted my honest love. You played with me until you saw I was firmly hooked, then coolly cast me aside!"

"False again!" cried Wilda, with spirit. "I never pretended to regard you with favor, much less did I give you any hope to think I loved you. Love—bah! I *always* hated you! More—I loathed and despised you! And now—your very touch is worse than poison!"

"All the same, you will marry me," he retorted, his voice cool and even enough, but the shifting color in his face showed how sharply her words stung him.

A short, mocking laugh parted her red lips at this speech.

"You are mad! I would rather clasp a festering corpse to my bosom! Once more, unhand me, you cowardly villain!"

"Wait a bit, my proud beauty. I may have a still more difficult choice for you to make. It rests with you whether you have a wedding or a hanging—whether you will smile on a husband, or weep over a corpse with the hangman's noose still around its broken neck! Take your choice, Wilda!"

There was something in his tone, even more than the words he uttered, that sent a cold chill through her heart.

"What do you mean?" she faltered, then instantly recovered herself. "Bah! I am foolish for listening to you!"

"You will be worse than foolish if you don't listen," he said, sternly, gripping her hands so tightly that she winced with pain. "Pardon me," releasing them. "I did not mean to hurt you. I'm not afraid of your running away now, for to do so before you have promised by all you hold sacred to marry me when and where I may nominate, seals the death-warrant of your precious brother. In one word, you must become my wife, or I will hang Ernest Gale higher than Haman of old."

"You cannot—he has done nothing!"

"He has killed an unarmed man by stabbing him to the heart with the dagger he carries in his bosom. I saw the deed, and I will swear to it, unless you give me that pledge!" Victor Wesendorf hissed sharply.

For a brief space the poor girl sat like one stupefied, but then, as Wesendorf bent forward to clasp her hands, a wild cry parted her lips, and evading him, Wilda struck him across the face with her whip. He reeled back with a sharp curse, and as her startled horse leaped away, the whip was brought down upon its flanks with all the power of her arm.

Victor brushed the trickling drops of blood from his face, and seemed about to follow after; but then he paused.

"Let her go. Time enough, my little spit-fire!"

Scarce knowing what she was doing, giving no thought to the course chosen by her horse, Wilda sped on and on, her face pale as death, her wild eyes staring straight before her, but without seeing aught external.

Smarting under the unaccustomed lash, the spirited horse rushed on, choosing its own course, nearing the ranch on which Dan Masters had "squatted." Through the fringe of timber and into the open ground—only to meet, face to face, a huge animal, from whose jaws a bloody foam dropped in flakes, whose eyeballs were protruding wildly, maddened by pain and rage.

Not a dozen yards divided them, and both were racing at full speed. Only prompt action on either side could avoid a disastrous collision. The horse did all that lay in its power, stopping as quickly as possible, wheeling to flee; but the maddened steer only bellowed more fiercely as it lowered its long horns and charged more rapidly than ever.

With terrible force these sharp horns dashed against the side of the horse, drawing from it an almost human shriek of agony as it went down before the heavy shock.

CHAPTER VI.

KIT DOES HIMSELF PROUD.

It was the sight of the peril which threatened his child, that drew that sharp cry from the lips of the taciturn drunkard and rendered him for the moment incapable of action.

One breathless moment, then, as Abner Gale saw the horse swing around sideways in the desperate effort to avoid that fierce onset—as he saw the savage thrust that buried those sharp horns more than one-half their length in the flank and stomach of the mustang—as he saw the mortally wounded creature fairly lifted from the ground and heard its horrible scream of agony—as he beheld the form of his best-loved child sent flying through the air—his powers failed him, and with a gasping, gurgling moan through which the name of his daughter was barely distinguishable, he reeled in his saddle, then fell heavily to the ground.

And in good truth it seemed as though naught mortal could save his child from death.

Poor Wilda, stunned, her heart torn, her senses benumbed by that frightful revelation made by Victor Wesendorf, heard nothing, saw nothing until her horse made that desperate effort to avoid a collision with the steer, and then it was too late for her to do anything.

She saw the bellowing brute lower his long, sharp-pointed horns and plunge forward with redoubled speed, and instinctively she slipped her foot from the stirrup. She had time for no more before the shock came, and then she felt herself flying through the air, partially from the collision, partly aided by her own elastic muscles.

She struck the ground fairly on her feet; but unfortunately one of them descended on a loose stone, and she fell headlong, all the more heavily from the desperate effort she made to preserve her balance.

Then it was that the free, out-door life, the generous exercise to which she had been accustomed nearly all of her life, stood Wilda in good stead. Though the shock was quite sufficient to have completely disabled almost any woman, she leaped to her feet and darted away along the trail she had followed in riding there.

Wilda cast a quick glance over her shoulder, to see the savage beast tear its crimsoned horns out of the dying carcass, giving them one mad shake that cast a red spray around, then roar again with redoubled fury as its bloodshot eyes fell upon that fleeing figure. She saw this—saw the steer plunge toward her—and even more.

She saw horses and riders not far away, though in that sore extremity she failed to recognize them. An appealing cry welled up in her throat, only to be cut short by a shriek of despair as her ankle turned on the pebble-strewn ground, and she fell in a helpless heap before that infuriated brute!

All this passed with the rapidity of thought, and it was when he saw Wilda trip and fall for the second time, seeming to him, owing to the course taken by the chase, as though she dropped fairly beneath the feet of the steer, that the liquor-shattered nerves of Abner Gale gave way.

Perhaps it was just as well for Kit Fox seemed the only one of the spectators who was capable of prompt action, and almost before the heavy body of the brand-burner touched the ground, that agile form was in the vacated saddle and dashing at top speed toward the scene of peril.

"Turn aside—into the brush!" he shouted at the top of his voice, as he sunk his spurs to their shanks between the ribs of the horse. "Out of line, an' I'll knock the—"

As he struck the saddle, Kit felt the rifle which was hung to the pommel, and instinctively his hands closed on this and brought it up to his cheek. But, fine shot though he had often proved himself, he dared not risk one now, with that fair girl only partially hidden by the bulk of the mad ox. If she would only dart to one side, if but for a step or two, he knew that he could easily drop the brute in his tracks; and so he pealed forth that advice, only to check himself with a gasping catch of the breath as he saw the girl trip and fall, directly in the path of the charging brute!

"Better lead than horns!" he muttered, as his eye glanced along the polished tube.

The steer was lowering its head until its bloody muzzle fairly swept the ground. The reddened horns were quivering with eagerness to smite their prey, when the finger of Kit Fox pressed the trigger and the rifle belched forth its contents.

In vain! Whether it was the uneven step of his horse, the plunging gallop of the mad ox, or

his instinctive fear of sending death to the girl, the border boy failed either to kill or cripple the brute. The wound was severe, but in its present condition, it only served the mad ox as a spur to still greater fury. A savage bellow burst from its lungs, and then—

Picked up from the ground by those frightful horns, the maiden was tossed high into the air by the tensely-drawn muscles of that mighty neck!

Still plying his spurs until they grated against the bone, ejecting the empty shell and throwing another from the magazine into the chamber, Kit Fox rushed on, hoping against hope. He saw that he was too late, but still his finger pressed the trigger, and his aim was never more steady, even though he saw the being he was doing his best to preserve from a terrible death, flung high into the air at that very instant.

He flung aside the rifle and rose in the stirrups as his spur-tortured beast plunged on. And then—it seemed a miracle, even to himself! He caught Wilda Gale in his arms as she fell toward the earth!

In his ears rung a wild shout of joy and wonder, but then came a heavy shock. His horse was shaken from its stride, and instead of clearing the fallen steer, it struck heavily against the struggling carcass, falling headlong and hurling both Kit Fox and Wilda Gale to the ground.

Even then the marvelous strength, skill, activity, of the border boy was sufficient to guard the fair girl who had so providentially been flung into his arms. Though the fall was wholly unexpected, Kit managed to alight on his feet, taking all the shock on himself in the fall which followed.

Relaxing the grasp which had instinctively tightened around the form of the girl, Kit Fox freed himself and leaped to his feet, revolver in hand, for he had no time to note the effects of his last shot, and he expected another charge from the mad steer.

The rapid discharge of fire-arms guided his confused gaze, and he saw that Carl Wesendorf had come up and was emptying his revolver into the quivering carcass of the steer. He knew that the danger was past, and a curious mist began to come before his vision. He staggered as he stood, and like one half-asleep he heard the hoarse cry of Abner Gale as he rushed past him and caught Wilda to his bosom. He could just distinguish a trembling, yet very musical voice. He tried to turn in that direction, but then his limbs seemed to fail him.

"Father! he is hurt! Look to him!" cried Wilda, as she saw the lad, who had so gallantly rescued her from what had seemed certain death, reel, then stagger back and sink down against the still quivering carcass of the steer.

Nearer fainting than he had ever been in his life, Kit Fox heard those words, and fought back the strange weakness, shrinking from the hands that caught his arms, muttering:

"Git out! I'm all hunky! Little, but I'm tough!"

He saw, still through that curious mist, a face which he recognized as that of Carl Wesendorf bending over him, and he almost savagely struck the hand from his arm, rising to his feet with a desperate exertion of will that for a brief space called back his scattered senses. He saw Wilda, her pretty face marked with dirt and one little rill of blood. She was looking into his face with mingled pity and gratefulness, but just then he had thoughts only for her.

"You're hurt, miss?" he stammered, his voice sounding to his own ears like that of a stranger, far away and indistinct.

"No, thanks to you, brave boy!" earnestly cried Wilda, taking his hand between her own soft palms and pressing it gratefully. "I must have been killed only for you. I can never thank you sufficiently for—"

"Then don't—waste time—"

Kit was vaguely conscious of saying something, though he could not hear his own voice. He felt that he was standing on the edge of a vast precipice, with the soil crumbling beneath his feet—that he was falling—and instinctively his fingers closed over the girl's hands, dragging her with him as he fell back upon the carcass of the slaughtered steer. And then all was a blank to him for a time.

Wilda, unable to release her hands, fell with the border boy, but the cry which parted her lips was born of her concern for his welfare, not of personal fear.

"Father, help! He is hurt—hurt in saving me from death! Look to him—let somebody ride for a doctor!" she cried.

Kit Fox released his grip as his senses fled, and Wilda was caught away from his body by her parent. Carl Wesendorf bent over the border boy, making a hasty inspection, then looking up with a light, careless laugh that jarred most disagreeably on the nerves of the maiden.

"It is nothing very serious, my dear. He strained himself in catching you, or in the fall from the horse. He will be all right in a few minutes, I dare say."

Wilda turned from him with a shudder of aversion.

"Father, you see," she urged. "Think! only for him, I might now be— *Ugh!*" with a quiver of horror, as she glanced at the blood-stained horns, long and sharp, terrible weapons indeed when backed by that bulk and mass of muscles.

Carl Wesendorf noticed that shudder, and his face flushed hotly, an evil light coming into his eyes. But he arose and passed his flask over to Abner Gale, his voice smooth and even:

"Give him a drop of that, old friend, and he'll come out right side up."

He turned away and moved to where Dan Masters, sullen-faced and treacherous-looking, was standing. And at a sign from him, the brand-burner led the way around the curve in the road, where they were hidden from view of Gale and Wilda.

In the hands of his daughter, Abner Gale was but a reed, to be bent and swayed at her slightest will, save in one respect. She could not wean him from strong drink.

Aided by her, he set about restoring Kit Fox to consciousness, and their efforts were soon rewarded. It was as Carl Wesendorf declared. The lad had received no particular injury in either body or limbs. His fit of faintness was occasioned simply by his powers, both mental and physical, having been tasked so severely. A few drops of brandy, a little rubbing and fanning were all the restoratives necessary.

When his eyes first opened, they saw only Wilda Gale, and a faint smile came into his pale countenance as he said:

"You are not hurt, then, lady? Or was it all a dream? Did not that— But you were tossed! I remember, now! And I felt sure you were killed, or badly injured, at least!"

"No, I am safe and sound," smiled Wilda though the soft flush which that admiring gaze called to her cheeks as quickly faded away. "Somehow, the points of the horns did not hit me—I must have rested between them, they were so wide! But the fall would have killed or crippled me, only for you!"

"We have much to be thankful for, an' me more'n all the rest, young man," said the giant's deep voice, as he grasped Kit by the hand, pressing it warmly. "The sight o' my pore gal's danger clean knocked me out, an' I couldn't do nothin' to'rds helpin' her, while you—"

He paused abruptly, for Kit Fox jerked his hand swiftly, rudely from his grasp, the smile changing to a frown as he rose to his feet. Wilda looked astonished and hurt. Kit could not help but see this, and he hastily averted his face, to meet the keen glance of Carl Wesendorf, who just then returned from his private consultation with Dan Masters.

"Ay! it was a gallant deed, and most gallantly performed, my dear sir," he said, his voice hearty and cordial. "You may be only a boy, as you seem proud of being, but this bout you have put us veterans to the blush. A gallant deed, I say again!"

"Once is more'n a plenty," coldly returned Kit Fox, apparently not seeing the white hand which was offered him.

"It's your modesty that says that, my dear fellow! But I will not be denied. I must shake your hand for that noble performance. Put it there, my gallant lad!"

Reluctantly Kit Fox extended his hand—only to have it grasped fiercely, a savage jerk pulling him off his feet and causing him to fall on his face, while Carl Wesendorf fell upon him, twisting both hands of the lad behind his back and snapping around his wrists the handcuffs which Dan Masters hastily produced!

"A noble deed and a gallant lad, but all the same you're a brand-burner, and my prisoner!"

CHAPTER VII.

A QUESTION OF IDENTITY.

UTTERING those words in a tone of savage exultation, Carl Wesendorf leaped to his feet again and stood gazing down into the upturned face of the youth whom he had so treacherously ironed. No sooner had that heavy weight been removed from his back, than Kit Fox whirled

over, partially rising, wonder and bewilderment mingled with the growing rage that glowed in his eyes and distorted his spotted countenance.

"Never put your head between the jaws of the lion, my fine fellow, without first making sure you can draw his teeth before he has time to bite," the deputy-sheriff cried mockingly, showing his utter heartlessness now that he once cast the mask aside. "You played a bold game, but mighty carelessly. As a natural consequence, you've lost the first trick."

"You done it, then?" slowly uttered Kit Fox. "You axed me to let you shake my han', an' then jerked me over?"

"As the shortest and easiest way out of it, yes!"

"An' you putt these bracelets onto me, too, I reckon?"

As he spoke, the border boy twisted his chin over his shoulder and tried to catch a glimpse of his helpless hands. There was a peculiar sound to his voice that startled Carl Wesendorf a little, but then he replied:

"Of course—and why not? I caught you brand-burning the stock I saw you stampede with my own eyes. I'm an officer of the law in duty bound to arrest all such criminals. I hated to take you just now, thus dimming the glory which this enthusiastic young lady was pouring over you in floods; but—"

Carl Wesendorf never completed that sneering sentence.

The treacherous treatment to which he had been subjected under the guise of cordial goodwill, restored the scattered senses of the border boy quicker and more completely than aught else in the world could have done, and with cat-like agility he rose to his feet, leaped into the air and straightened out his doubled-up legs with all the power he could command.

The deputy-sheriff was taken completely by surprise by this swift action, and before he could make a move to save himself, those armed heels were dashed, one in his face, the other against his throat, with a terrible force that hurled him headlong to the ground, bruised and bleeding.

Unfortunately for Kit Fox, one of his long-roweled spurs caught in the collar of his enemy and destroyed his own balance, causing him to alight awkwardly, falling to his knees. And before he could regain his footing, Dan Masters darted in and dealt him a crushing blow over the head with a heavy club which he snatched up from the ground on witnessing the utter discomfiture of his leader.

All this transpired with such rapidity that neither Abner Gale nor Wilda had an opportunity to interfere, or even utter a protest against such brutal treatment of the one who had so short a time before risked all for her safety. But now, as Dan Masters drew back his club for a second stroke, the giant caught it from his hand, hurling the sullen-faced ruffian a dozen yards away with the same motion.

Wilda sprang forward and knelt beside the fallen youth, whose face was in the trampled dust and gravel, a sharp cry of generous indignation parting her lips. She was about to raise his head to her lap, when she caught the sound of savage curses, and glancing up, beheld Carl Wesendorf scrambling to his feet, drawing a long, vicious-looking knife, which he brandished savagely as he started toward the fallen youth.

"Out o' the way! Let me at him! I'll carve his heart—"

"Stop! Carl Wesendorf, if you value your own life!" cried Wilda, kneeling, the bright sunbeams reflecting back from the plated revolver with which she had him covered. "Back, I say! Dare to lift a hand against him again, and I swear I will blow your brains out!"

Mad, infuriated though he was, Carl Wesendorf did halt. He had sense enough left him to see that Wilda Gale meant every word she uttered just then. He saw that her pistol covered his brain, and he knew enough of her spirit to be sure that she would not shrink from putting her threat into execution.

With a snarling accent, he turned to the giant: "Look to her, Ab Gale, if you don't want harm to befall the silly creature. Take her away and let me finish that boy-devil—you'd better!"

"Father," cried Wilda, appealingly, as a swift glance in that direction showed her the giant in doubt how to act—showed her that, while feeling truth and justice urged him to stand firm, the powerful influence which Carl Wesendorf had gained over his weaker nature was holding him irresolute. "Father, be true to yourself and your manhood! Remember, he saved my life!"

"That's so, Carl!" with a sudden plucking up

of spirit that made him appear more of a man than he had for many a long day. "Only fer him, whar'd my pore gal be now? Dead—all trampled to mush by that cussed long-horn! The lad saved her—saved her when you 'n' me couldn't lift a finger! It was mighty white, clean through, the way he done it, an' he ort o' bin treated like a gentleman fer it, 'stead o' like *this*. 'Twas a pizen dirty trick you played onto the lad, but you shain't do him no furdur harm, 'less you climb over me fu'st!"

Carl Wesendorf seemed taken aback by this unexpected display of independence, but it only lasted for a moment. One sneering, insulting grin he cast at the rebellious giant, then, as though scorning to waste another syllable on him, the villain turned to Wilda, who still knelt beside the senseless youth, her pistol ready for use in case of need.

"Very well, Miss Wilda Gale," he uttered, slowly emphasizing each word. "As a lady, of course you must have your own way, but you would show a little more wisdom were you to stop and count the cost of your action before deciding."

"I am only repaying the debt I owe him, in saving him from your murderous knife, Carl Wesendorf!"

"And dooming your father to shame, if not death!"

Sharply he hissed the words, his eyes glowing like living coals, and somehow they carried conviction with them to the hearts of both Wilda and her father. The giant shrunk back, a hunted look coming into his eyes, while the girl, her voice lower, more strained, managed to enunciate:

"What do you mean? I don't understand!"

Carl Wesendorf laughed, coldly, yet mockingly. He felt that he still held the balance of power in his hands.

"What do I mean? That is easily told. I mean that if the lad in whom you seem to feel such a sudden and overpowering interest, is suffered to go his own way from this spot, he will hang your father—ay, Abner Gale!" turning upon the flinching giant with stern emphasis, "I mean it all. Let him go free, and only instant flight can possibly save your neck from the hangman's noose!"

"Father, tell him he lies!" gasped Wilda, letting her pistol drop from her unnerved fingers as she turned imploringly toward the trembling man whom she called parent.

With a cat-like leap Carl Wesendorf caught up the weapon and dropped it into his own pocket. Wilda shrunk from him as though anticipating a blow or other brutality, but as she saw his motive an indignant flush colored her cheeks and her voice rung out sharply, bitterly: "You lying cur! You devised that foul charge only to throw me off my guard. Father, will you stand by and see—"

"Bah!" with a mocking laugh, as one white finger was leveled toward the giant settler. "Look into his face, my dear, and then tell me that I bring a false charge against him. It is written there too plain for even you to doubt!"

Loving her father as she did, Wilda Gale could not deny the truth of this last sentence. If ever guilt was imprinted on face of living man, it was to be read now in those features. "If you think I lie, or if you doubt the truth of my words, Abner Gale, ask Dan Masters the real name of the fellow. Speak up, man!" turning toward the burly brand-burner.

"It's Em'ry Dearn, son o' the ole man—"

A hoarse cry escaped the lips of the giant, and he reeled back, his bloodshot eyes fixed with a wild stare on the bloody face of the youth who had given the name of Kit Fox. And the soul of Wilda grew sick within her as she saw that look of fear, for the face of her father was that of a sinner whose crime has at last found him out!

With a desperate effort Abner Gale rallied, gasping:

"It can't be—it's a lie—they ain't no 'sem-blance—"

"A wig and a little cunningly-applied paint," said Carl Wesendorf, with a short laugh, as he poured a few drops of brandy into the hollow of his hand, then stooped over the motionless figure, rubbing his cheek smartly.

With another laugh he drew back, and Abner Gale shuddered anew as he saw the skin show clear and rosy, no longer covered with those disgusting brown blotches. Beyond a doubt the lad was in disguise, for, though the gum with which it was fitted to the closely-shaven skull resisted the effort Wesendorf made to remove the coarse-haired wig, it moved sufficient to show that the covering was artificial.

This rude treatment, added to the fumes of the strong liquor, served to recall the wander-

ing senses of the prisoner, and Carl Wesendorf fell back a pace or two as Kit Fox opened his eyes and struggled to rise.

"Go on, Dan Masters, and finish your story," sternly uttered the deputy-sheriff, as that rascal showed signs of a desire to slink away from the presence of the one whom he had so basely betrayed. "What brought this gentleman here?"

"He come to hunt out the brand-burners," muttered the rascal, shifting uneasily from foot to foot as Kit Fox flashed a fiery glance in his direction. "It was all a put-up job, his runnin' off them critters last night, though he pretended to me as how he was the pure quill. I kin sw'ar that he is the raal owner o' the long-horns. Them cowboys was actin' under his orders, an' they're here fer to be ready to leir' him a han' when he makes the big diskivery—"

"What discovery?" sharply demanded Wesendorf, as Masters hesitated once more.

"Of how ole man Dearn come by his last sickness!"

With a sudden desperation Abner Gale strode up to the side of the border boy, stooping and looking keenly into his face, his voice husky, his limbs trembling like those of one under the influence of a powerful chill.

"Who be you, anyhow, young man?"

"Kit Fox—half-white an' free-born!"

"Say that man lies, an' I'll set you free, ef I hev to down 'em both, fer you saved *her* life—my little gal! Swear that you're nobody but Kit Fox. Swear that you ain't Emory Dearn—that you're a brand-burner—that they ain't no dirty trick in all this doin's, an' I'll set you free!"

A short, almost insulting laugh broke from the youth.

"Why set me free if I am a rascal? Surely you have more to fear from such than from an honest man. It can't be that *you* are one of that kidney—that *you* are a—"

A sobbing moan from the lips of Wilda Gale drew his eyes in that direction, and the words which he would have uttered in addition died away upon his lips.

He had said quiet enough, though, to send Abner Gale staggering back, the feverish flush fading from his whisky-blotched face, that hunted look deepening in his streaked eyes.

As though to cover this silent confession on the part of his friend, Carl Wesendorf stepped forward, saying sharply:

"Bluffing won't save your stake, young man; but if you make a clean breast of it, the gallant deed you recently performed will help to give you another chance. This fellow charges you with being a spy; with coming here to interfere with those who have never injured you in any way."

He paused, watching the youth sharply, evidently in expectation of an outburst if he was really the son of Cuthbert Dearn, but none such came.

"If you will swear by all that mankind holds holy—I'll dictate the oath when you are ready to take it—that you are just what you claim; if you swear that you are not Emory Dearn, are no relation whatever to the late Cuthbert Dearn—I pledge you my word of honor that you shall go free as air! I will remove those irons, and then, if you feel at all aggrieved by anything I have done, I'll give you ample satisfaction in any shape or form to suit you best. Speak out!"

"I don't make no barg'in with sech a p'izen cuss as you," deliberately replied the border boy. "My name is Kit Fox. I'm little, but I'm mighty tough, an' the man don't live that owes me any great debt. You won't do it long. I'll keep it in mind, an' when the time comes, as come it will in course o' natur', be sure I'll pay you off with double an' compound int'rest!"

"You have said quite enough," with a short, cruel laugh; then turning toward the giant, he added: "Are you satisfied, Abner Gale?"

"I am not!" cried Wilda, with a sudden return of her usual spirit. "You shall not harm him, after the service he rendered me, you conscienceless coward!"

"Stop her silly mouth and take her away, Ab Gale, or it will be the worse for both her and you. Do you hear me, man?"

Sternly he spoke, and giant though he was in size and physical strength, the brand-burner cowered before him.

"Come, gal, I reckon we'd better go home now," he muttered, as he caught her around the waist and lifted her upon his horse, unheeding her struggles to free herself. But as they moved away, there came back the menacing words:

"Beware, Carl Wesendorf! Harm him, and he shall be avenged, if I have to kill you with my own hand!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A PRECIOUS SCOUNDREL'S NERVE.

OUTWARDLY cool and composed as though not in the least threatened with danger, Kit Fox watched this brief scene in which the complete subjection of the giant brand-burner to his stronger-willed mate was so plainly made manifest. Only the steel-like glitter which reflected from his eyes told of the storm of fierce passions working beneath the surface, but no one who could gaze into them at that moment would doubt the intensity of his hatred for Abner Gale.

Yet, when Wilda flung back those brave words, vainly resisting the gentle force which drew her away, a softer light filled the orbs, and his tightly compressed lips relaxed, almost unconsciously to himself.

And Carl Wesendorf noted this, as he seemed to note everything that happened around him. His bristling mustaches curled and a short, contemptuous laugh issued from his lips.

"A mutual mash, or I'm a Christian! So much the worse for your health, young fellow, for that crosses another pet trail of mine, and you'd better have cut your throat than—"

He cut himself short with an abruptness that showed he had been carried further by his passion than he deemed prudent. Nor was his temper improved greatly by the sneering laugh with which Kit Fox spoke:

"Squintin' that way yourself, be ye? Then you're a heap bigger fool than you look—which is needless. The lady wouldn't use you as a broom to sweep out a hog-pen with!"

"Talk takes no hide off, my dear fellow," laughed Wesendorf, recovering his usual control over his passions. "Talk while you have the chance, for it may not be yours much longer, unless you can tell a story straight enough to cheat justice."

He cast a significant glance toward Dan Masters, then turned his back and strode to where his horse was lazily nibbling the tips of the thorn-bushes just beyond the dead ox.

Kit Fox had his hands secured behind his back, but his feet were still at liberty, and instinctively he cast a swift glance around, as though to sum up his chances for escape if he should make a desperate break for freedom. But if this hope entered his mind, it was quickly rejected, for he saw Dan Masters standing near, hand on revolver, which, though still in his belt, was ready cocked.

His red lips curled and a curious light filled his eyes as he saw this, for the apparent carelessness of the deputy-sheriff was fully explained. He expected an attempt to escape on the part of the prisoner, and had given Dan Masters to understand that any such effort must end in death!

With a mocking gleam in his eyes, Kit Fox watched Wesendorf as he slowly moved to his horse, fumbling at the saddle, to which hung a neatly coiled lasso, for he fully understood this sudden clumsiness on the part of the deputy-sheriff.

"Ain't you played the blame' fool long enough, ole cuss?" cried Kit, laughing at the start given by his enemy. "It won't work wuth a tinker's blessin', though it mought ef you'd hed anybody better'n a quarter-wit to help ye. Dan's skull is so durned thick that a idee can't git through it, so he writes it in plain print on his mug fer fear o' lettin' it slip his grip. Look at that photygraph—bloody murder all over it!"

If Kit Fox had any doubts before, they were dispelled by the look which overspread the face of the sullen traitor at this blunt and wholly unexpected charge. Nor was Carl Wesendorf much less annoyed, though he quickly hid all traces.

"Set him on his feet, Dan, and bring him along to the corral. And mind you, my good fellow, you've partly redeemed yourself by your course in this little affair, and if you act on the square clean through, it will speak for you when you come to answer for you' misdeeds. But if you try to slip away, or to set that young rascal free, I'll drop you like a dog."

"Oh, quit! You make me tired," drawled the border boy, as he rose to his feet before Dan Masters could lay hands on him. "You an' Dan air tarred with the same brush; but ef I ain't mighty wide o' my guess, you've got a coat or two o' dirty blackness over ye more'n what he hes—an' they's enough stickin' to him to keep him blazin' in the hottest pits o' Satan's kingdom fer a thousand years!"

But Carl Wesendorf had his passions well under control now, and showed no signs of being stung by these words, uttered as they were

in tones of the deepest contempt. He leaped lightly into the saddle and led the way back to the corral. A true Texan, he would not even walk those few rods.

Gingerly, and at the full length of his arm, Dan Masters gripped the shoulder of his captive, his other hand resting on a pistol-butt, while his legs were ever ready to carry his precious carcass beyond reach of a salaried such as he had seen Kit bestow upon the sheriff. But the prisoner made no effort in that direction.

At a motion from Wesendorf, Masters placed Kit Fox with his back against the corral fence, where it made a sharp angle, then shambled to one side. Sitting on his horse, Wesendorf spoke rapidly:

"Young man, I've caught you in a crime that is sufficient to land you in the penitentiary, if lynch law will let you live long enough for a regular court to send you there. I saw you run off these cattle last night, with more than as many more. I saw you here, burning the brands off and putting on a different one. If you are Kit Fox, then you are a brand-burner, and hence liable to arrest. But this fellow swears that your real name is Emory Dearn, only child of the late Cuthbert Dearn, in whose name this brand stands recorded. If he speaks true, then I have no authority for arresting you, since a man may do what he pleases with his own property. Admit that you are Emory Dearn, and you are free."

"My name's Kit Fox, as I told you afore," was the cold, unmoved reply of the border boy. Carl Wesendorf turned to Dan Masters, speaking sharply:

"Repeat what you told me a while ago, when I cornered you. Tell a straight story. If I catch you in a lie, look out!"

At a safe distance from those active heels, and reassured by the countenance of the officer of the law, the hangdog-looking ruffian spoke up promptly enough:

"Shell I go back to the very fu'st, boss?"

"Tell the story just as you gave it to me."

"Waal, ef I must! Then, your honor, I hed to skin out o' here fer a time, an' afore I quit runnin' I fetched up at the capertul, whar it was I fu'st run onto this feller. Ye see I got in to a little hitch down yender, which sorter laid me by the heels. I was mighty glum over it, fer I hedn't no fri'nds in them parts, an' I reckoned I'd hev to do time fer a year or so; but I didn't."

"Thinkin' it'd go easier onto me, mebbe, I sorter hinted 'roun' that I could do the State a heap o' sarvice, ef I was giv' the chainece, an' in the eend this feller was let in to me an' sot his pumps to work the best he knowed how, axin' big heap o' questions 'bout matters down here in ole Wilbarger."

"Course I couldn't tell him nothin' o' any raal 'portance, fer I've live' a honest man all my life, an'—"

"Drop that—talk straight!" sharply uttered Carl.

"Waal, I made 'em think I'd hit a bonanza, fer sure, an' in the eend they sot me loose on my promise to show 'em the inside o' the brand-burnin' business. All the time I was only workin' to git loose, mind ye, boss."

"Go on. What does it matter to me what you confessed?"

"Nawthin', in course, boss," with an apologetic grin. "I was set loose, on trial, as they said, an' then I found I was to run in cahoots with this feller, Kit Fox, as he called hisself."

"But that is only an assumed name?"

"Sart'in as death, boss," was the positive reply. "I went with him to the old man Dearn's ranch. He never let on that he was any but a stranger to them all, afore me. He said he wanted to git some p'int's 'bout the big herd the old man lost up this way; but I smelt a mice, an' nosed aroun' ontel one night I ketched him an' the ole lady in a conflag when they thought nobody couldn't hear 'em. She called him Em'ry, her boy, the last livin' thing she hed to keep her from dryin' up an' blowin' away. She begged him to stay at home an' give up all sech resky idees, but he wouldn't hear to that. He said he'd come home fer to get even on them what gave his pap the bounce out o' the world; that he'd listed all the family 'fluence with the gov'nor, ontel he got a commish as secret 'tective, an' he wasn't goin' to pull off the harness ontel he'd found and punished them as murdered the ole man."

"You swear that this is truth you are tellin'?"

"Take any oath you want, boss," was the positive reply. "But I ain't told all, yit. I didn't l'arn no more that time, but I kep' my eyes an' ears open, an' I see through the hull job long afore we

got here. Those cowboys were sent with them cattle, jest as a blind. It was 'ranged that the boy an' me was to stampede them, an' burn off the brands, so's to make the boy solid with the raal trade. The cowboys was to bounce in onto us when the proofs was plain, an' we was to stan' 'em off. That'd set any doubts at rest, an' git him the full confidence of the brand-burners. Then he'd be free to git at the bottom of the way his dad come by his last sickness."

"He committed suicide, losing his nerve when he lost his stock, of course," laughed Carl Wesendorf.

"You lie!" grated Kit Fox, giving way to a sudden burst of passion. "He was murdered—assassinated, most foully! The dastardly crime lies between two men—between you and Abner Gale! Not content with robbing him of a fortune, you added a still fouler crime, because you knew he was not a man to lie quietly under such a wrong. You feared he would return and rout out your cursed gang of thieves—you believed he suspected the truth—that you, Carl Wesendorf, was chief man of all the brand-burners!"

"You think so, my dear fellow?" drawled the sheriff, his heavy eyebrows arching in mock surprise at this outburst.

"Dare you deny it?" swiftly retorted the young man.

"Dan, suppose you take a little walk around the corral? I'll call you when I want you."

Without a word the brand-burner obeyed, slinking away.

"Now, my fine fellow, I'll answer your question," said the deputy-sheriff, his voice smooth and even, but with an ugly light in his eyes. "Dan would hardly dare make a move against me, unless it was to save his worthless life, but all the same, it's a mighty foolish man who utters dangerous words before an unnecessary witness. I am the chief of the people you call brand-burners. We are a regularly organized company, divided into different ranks, each one of which has a certain portion of work to perform. It is mine to lay the plans and overlook everything. I am king in old Wilbarger, so far as actual authority is concerned, though I am nominally serving under Sheriff Stewart. There are still greater men behind him—men who are above the reach of the law. You see, I am frank and open with you, Mr. Emory Dearn!"

"My name is Kit Fox. I don't know the feller you try to make me b'lieve I be," quietly replied the border boy.

"Kit Fox, and a brand-burner, while I am a deputy-sheriff, whose duty is to arrest all such lawless characters," laughed Wesendorf, seemingly enjoying the sudden turn. "I caught you red-handed. I mean to hand you over to justice, to be lawfully tried for the double crime of cattle-stealing and brand-burning. Those, as you may have heard, are considered very heinous sins in Wicked Wilbarger. I'll try to keep secret the charges on which you are arrested, but if it should happen to leak out, I very much fear the people will rise in their might and insist on hanging you as an example to others of your ilk. Of course I'll fight in your defense, but I never could shoot straight where a neighbor was the target, and I fear—"

A sharp cry from Dan Masters, who came running up at this period, cut the mocking speech short.

"Thar they be, boss!" gasped the craven wretch, pointing down the road to where three horsemen were just spurring into sight near where the mad steer lay dead. "The cowboys!"

One glance, then Carl Wesendorf leaped to the ground and grasped Kit Fox by the shoulder, drawing a revolver with his other hand, grating between his teeth:

"Make an offer to escape, and I'll blow your brains out!"

Startled by the abrupt action of its master, the horse trotted ahead a few paces, leaving the sheriff and his prisoner fully exposed to view. That they were seen by the cowboys was plainly proven by their abrupt halting, drawing together as though in hasty consultation.

But Carl Wesendorf was not a man to give his antagonists more time to plot against him than he was obliged to, and in sharp, stern tones he called out:

"Hello, there! Who are you, and what do you want?"

"Durned ef it ain't the sheriff!" cried Bouncing Bill, as though just making the discovery. "An' thar's our long-horns! Whooray, boys! he's ketched the 'tarnal stampeder!"

"Halt! one step nearer, and I open my batteries!" thundered Wesendorf, as the cowboys spurred forward.

"Durn it, boss; you know us!" cried Fracker, in an injured tone, but reining in all the same.

"You saw our stock run off, an' cain't blame us fer wantin' to git it back ag'in."

"I only know that I've caught a man brand-burnin', and that I bear a commission as sheriff, bidding me arrest and hand over to justice all such law-breakers. You can claim the stock, if it proves to be yours, and face the prisoner when he is brought out for trial. But if you move a step nearer or lay hand to weapon, I'll blow his brains out that instant!" and a cocked revolver was clapped to his prisoner's temple.

CHAPTER IX.

PLANTING A DANGEROUS WITNESS.

An expression of utter disgust overspread the florid face of Bouncing Bill Fracker at these sharp words and uncompromising action. For a brief space he was thoroughly puzzled what to say or what course to take, trying to catch some hint from the hard-set countenance of the prisoner.

But Kit Fox made no sign.

Failing to gather any inspiration from that source, the leader of the cowboys blurted out:

"Sheriff or no, you're makin' a durn fool o' yourself! A man cain't steal his own property, kin he?"

"What do you mean by that?"

Still Kit Fox made no sign, and Fracker snarled angrily:

"That the young gent you've got thar owned them cattle from the fust, an' hed a partict right to stompede 'em when an' whar he durned pleased!"

"They carry the Dearn brand."

"An' that's him, ain't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Shell I ram it into my gun an' try ef powder kin drive it through yer fernal thick cabeza?" sneered the cowboy, nodding in a most frightful manner in his efforts to gain some hint from Kit Fox.

But the border boy stared straight ahead of him, not a muscle of his face changing.

Bouncing Bill saw that the prisoner would not or could not give him the desired hint as guide for his actions, and so followed his own judgment without further parley.

"It's Em'ry Dearn you've got thar. He owns them long-horns. It was jest a bit o' fun that made him stompede 'em."

"That may or may not be, just as it happens," coolly retorted Wesendorf, still keeping his pistol at the head of Kit Fox. "If it is so, the young fellow will doubtless be able to clear himself in a day or two."

"Day or two nothin'!" was the indignant interposition. "You cain't 'rest an' hold a man fer playin' tricks with his own property! We've proved what fer he is an' all about it, an' ef you don't drap your grip like he was a hot 'tater, you'll git the sickest set o' burnt fingers this—"

"Durn so much clickety-clack!" growled Dick Stumpf.

"Run right over the dunder-headed cuss!" echoed Hickey.

"Hold hard, you!" cried Wesendorf, for the first time betraying something like excitement as he boldly faced the angry cowboys. "I'm an officer of the law, doing my duty. This man is my prisoner, duly arrested. If you attempt a rescue, I'll send a bullet through his skull, so help me Heaven!"

Not one of those who heard him utter those words could doubt his perfect earnestness, and the cowboys paused, once more at a loss what course to pursue. Alone, of them all, Kit Fox showed not the slightest trace of fear or excitement. It seemed as though nature had forgotten to give him any nerves.

He knew that the deputy-sheriff was angry that they had not given him a plausible excuse for firing that shot, and a vivid light came into his eyes, for he believed he could now answer the question which had puzzled so many besides himself. If so, there was no longer any necessity for keeping his disguise, and acting on a sudden impulse, he spoke out:

"Don't act rashly, boys. This gentleman is an officer of the law. He caught us brand-burnin', and of course he arrested us. That's his side of the picture; now for mine!"

"He only wants a plausible excuse for killing me. Don't give him one. Go your way, in peace, but remember in whose hands you left me. Keep an eye on him, but otherwise obey the orders you have already received."

With wonderful rapidity these last sentences were uttered, and Carl Wesendorf was so thoroughly taken by surprise that he could make no move to cut them short before Kit Fox paused of his own accord, having said all he wished.

The prisoner laughed quietly in his face as his

rage-inflamed eyes turned toward him, and said pleasantly:

"Now go on with your rat-killing, sheriff! The shot that kills me will blow your own brains out as well!"

"Threats won't drive me from my sworn duty," retorted Wesendorf, recovering his usual coolness as though by magic, and speaking loud enough for the cowboys to hear him. "If a thousand of your kidney were to attempt your rescue they'd carry off your dead body! I'm responsible for you until the law gives me a receipt in full. Dan Masters, catch up the horses."

Carl Wesendorf released his grip on Kit Fox, turning partially away, though he still held his revolver cocked. A cold smile flitted over the face of the border boy as he scented the trap. A slight motion of his head gave the cowboys their cue, and they quietly turned their horses' heads and rode away.

Dan Masters brought up the horses and Carl Wesendorf leaped into the saddle, saying, shortly:

"Help the prisoner up, Dan, then follow after. I may want you for further work."

Moving slowly, taking care that not a single action of his could possibly be twisted into an effort at escape, Kit Fox climbed into the saddle. And then, watched at a distance by the three cowboys, the trio moved away from the corrals.

Not a word passed between them until that ride came to an end. Though he must have known that the cowboys were keeping watch on them, Carl Wesendorf showed no sign of fear or annoyance. Cold and stern, he rode on until he reached his own house, a commodious, even handsome dwelling.

Two armed men made their appearance when the horses were reined up, and leaping from the saddle Carl Wesendorf addressed them, throwing his bridle-reins to Dan Masters:

"Help the prisoner down and bring him inside, boys."

Carl Wesendorf led the way, followed by his two henchmen in charge of the prisoner. He passed to a rear room, raised a closely-fitted trap-door in the floor, then stood aside, motioning the men to descend with their charge. He only paused long enough to strike a match and light a lantern, then followed after.

Kit Fox cast one swift glance around him, then stood motionless, awaiting the pleasure of his captors. That glance was sufficient to show him that he stood in a stone-walled cellar, with cement and concrete flooring.

"This young fellow is a prisoner of importance, boys," said the deputy-sheriff. "He must be kept here until I have finished other business. Iron his feet, and chain him to the wall. One of you remain inside with him, while the other keeps guard over the trap-door. See that your weapons are in good order, and shoot him dead at the first sign of an attempted rescue. I will be responsible for the action. You understand?"

"We'll kerry out orders ef it takes a leg, sheriff!"

"Do your duty, and I'll see that you are rewarded as you deserve," said Wesendorf, turning to Kit Fox and adding: "You have heard the instructions I give my men, young fellow. They will be carried out to the very letter. For your sake, I hope your fellow brand-burners will not attempt a rescue."

Kit Fox made no reply, and Carl Wesendorf held the lantern while his men placed irons around the ankles of the border boy, and placed him in a sitting posture in one corner of the cellar. They fitted an iron girdle around his waist, fastening it with padlock and key. From this led stout, short chains to a heavy staple in the masonry.

Satisfying himself that all was secure, Wesendorf took the keys, and leaving the lantern, bade one of the men follow. He closed the heavy trap-door, then turned to the man, saying:

"You have your orders, Tinker. If any attempt is made at rescuing the prisoner, defend yourself the best you can, and if the odds are too great, kill him before you take to cover. I don't think there is any danger of an attack before dark, even if it comes then, but if it should—you understand?"

"He shain't leave that hole alive, boss," was the quiet reply; and satisfied that he could depend on the man, the sheriff passed out of the house to where Dan Masters was still holding his horse.

The traitor was all of a tremble as he said, huskily:

"Them p'izen critters follered us clean here, boss! Thar they be, now!" pointing to two of the cowboys who were slowly riding across the valley, their faces turned in that direction.

Carl Wesendorf gazed at the men with a curious light in his big blue eyes, but said nothing until they disappeared from view behind a patch of stunted trees and bushes.

"They'll not trouble you as long as you are in my company, Dan, be sure of that! And fortunately for you, I've got a little errand that will take you to a safer region than this, and keep you busy until those rascals forget all about you."

"Thank the Lord fer that!" muttered Dan, as his master leaped into the saddle. "My skelp hes bin creepin' an' crawlin' all over my cabeza ever sence you made me peach! Ef I could, only 'a' picked my own time fer blowin', so them cussed devils wouldn't 'a' scented me, I wouldn't 'a' keered."

"You may count yourself lucky that I gave you the chance I did, old man," rudely interposed the sheriff. "No whining now. Remember your oath, and gather your wits together for the work I have in hand. If you botch it, salt won't save you!"

"I'll do the best I know how, boss," sullenly.

"Follow me, then," tersely added Wesendorf, riding rapidly, direct for the clump of timber behind which the cowboys had disappeared, but sheering off in a curve just before getting within pistol-shot, sweeping around until the men were seen.

"Look here, my fine fellows," cried Wesendorf, bluntly. "Your pard is in my house, guarded by men who are sworn to blow his brains out at the first sign of an attempted rescue. Take the hint or not, just as you please."

Without pausing for a reply, he wheeled to the left and, followed by Masters, rode rapidly away.

For full an hour he rode thus, casting many keen glances behind him, as though suspecting pursuit by the cowboys who might fancy they could capture him to hold as a hostage for the border boy in whom they were so deeply interested. Thus, at least, fancied Dan Masters, and knowing how little mercy he might expect at their hands, now that his treachery was plainly proven, he heaved many a sigh of relief when finally satisfied that no one was following them.

Even in his anxiety he could not help noticing the fact that Carl Wesendorf was riding a good many miles to gain very little distance in a direct line, but he had no suspicion of danger, even when the deputy-sheriff drew rein at the edge of a dense swamp of some little extent.

"Well, Dan, old fellow," said the sheriff, as he drew rein and alighted, laughing softly as he spoke, "I reckon we've shaken off those fellows, even if they tried to dog us. I didn't want them to get on your track if I could hinder it."

"I don't reckon it'd be over healthy fer me," muttered the traitor, with a sickly smile. "The quicker I'm out o' the neeborhood, the safer my skelp 'll feel!"

"I'll soon give you a good send-off, don't you fear, old man! Light and hitch. What I've got to say is too important for me to run any risks of being overheard."

Entirely unsuspecting, the doomed wretch dismounted and tied his horse to a sapling. The instant this was done, Carl Wesendorf dealt him a heavy blow on the back of the neck, then grasped him, pinning both arms to his sides, hurling him heavily to the ground, planting both knees in the hollow of his back as he shifted his grasp to the traitor's throat, cutting off the gurgling groan of fear and pleading.

"You know too much, curse you!" grated the assassin, driving the face of his victim into the mud while he tore off his belt of weapons, then pinned his arms to the ground with his knees. "You didn't confess all, over yonder, but I saw through your black soul! You betrayed me to that infernal young bloodhound, then sold him out because you thought I dropped to the little game!"

"Mercy—spare me—I'll do anythin'—"

"Too much, you white-livered cur!" snarled Wesendorf, once more driving his head into the mire, holding it there with one hand while he drew a long knife from his girdle.

A swift, vicious stroke, falling just at the base of the luckless wretch's skull, produced instant death, and with a short, evil laugh, Carl Wesendorf rose to his feet.

"A dirty job, but it's got to be done!" he muttered, as he carefully wiped his knife and replaced it in its sheath.

Then he stooped and picked up the body, bearing it in his arms out into the swamp, picking his way carefully, stepping from hummock to hummock, pausing on the very edge of a level patch where the green slime and moss told him deep mire and clinging quicksands lay hidden beneath. Head-foremost he lowered the corpse, pressing it into the slimy ooze, only ceasing when the watery mud slowly closed over the soles of his victim, and the green mask began to gradually close over the open space thus formed.

"You've served my purpose, Dan Masters, and were growing too dangerous a witness to be let live!" he muttered, turning back to where the horses stood. "I never did a job of planting in all my life that promised better results!"

"The soil's too wet—that seed'll rot and never sprout in this world, old fellow!" uttered a mocking voice.

CHAPTER X.

TWO OF A KIND.

WITH a sound that resembled the snarl of some wild beast rather than aught human, Carl Wesendorf jerked a revolver from his belt and faced the point from whence that mocking voice proceeded, his face white and hard as that of a corpse, his eyes glowing like balls of fire.

"Show yourself, curse you!" he grated, savagely, glaring around for a glimpse of the mocker. "One or a dozen, I don't—"

"Two to one you don't burn powder, old man!" added the same voice, as the speaker stepped into the open, confronting the assassin with unarmed hands.

It seemed a foolhardy action, for swift as thought the revolver covered him, but instead of firing, Carl Wesendorf staggered back a pace, lowering his weapon and averting his face, no longer white with fear, but red as the sunset glow.

He recognized his son, Victor Wesendorf, and in the first glow of shame he would rather have faced a dozen of his most bitter enemies. Villain though he was, utterly unscrupulous in his dealings with his fellow-men, his hands and soul stained with a thousand crimes, Carl Wesendorf had one redeeming virtue—his love for his son.

"Well, you *are* a terror, gov'nor!" exclaimed Victor, showing not the slightest trace of aversion for the criminal or pity for his victim. "As neatly performed as I could have done it myself! Old Dan Masters, wasn't it?"

"He jumped on me—tried to stab me in the back, and I killed him before I thought," faltered the father, flushing vividly as his son laughed mockingly.

"Too thin, old fellow—decidedly too gauzy! I saw the whole performance, and I'm glad of it, too, for I now begin to see that there is something of the 'pure quill' in you yet!"

"If you saw all, you must have heard me charge him with treachery. He was going to sell us out—had already betrayed some of our secrets to a cursed bloodhound—"

"That's all right," coarsely interrupted Victor. "Never offer excuses for performing a good deed. Dan ought to have left the world long ago, and the legislature should vote you a medal for ridding Wilbarger of the buzzard!"

"Then you don't—it won't make any difference."

Carl Wesendorf choked at the words he wished to utter, but there was expression enough in his yearning eyes to tell Victor his meaning. With a gay, careless laugh, he grasped the trembling hand, saying:

"Lord love you, gov'nor! I think all the more of you for this little agricultural exploit. We're two of a kind now—twins, rather than father and son. But how about this horse?"

Carl Wesendorf had partly recovered his wonted composure, and as Victor glanced toward the animal ridden thither by the dead man, he replied promptly enough:

"Turn him loose and bury the trappings. There'll not be many questions asked concerning Dan, for he had neither friends nor relatives."

This part of the business was quickly performed. The bridle was tied to the saddle, and with a long pole they were sunk deep in the mire, the pole being withdrawn and cast aside.

"That disposes of him forever," muttered the sheriff.

"If the job I've got on hand was as readily managed, I'd give a pretty penny! You must lend me a helping hand, gov."

"You've been getting into another scrape, Victor! Nothing really dangerous, I hope?" hastily asked the sheriff.

"Not to me," with a short laugh. "It may end in a hanging-match, though, if things don't work just right."

"So long as you don't play the principal part it matters little to me," replied Wesendorf, with an air of strong relief. "Of course I'll help you all I can, but let's get out of this hole first. Some one else may stumble on us, as you did on me."

"I saw you a couple of miles off, but you didn't hear me call. As I needed your help, I struck across to cut you off, and—you know the rest," carelessly uttered Victor.

Carefully covering over the little patch of blood, Carl Wesendorf followed the lead of his promising offspring, who soon reached the spot where he had left his horse. He mounted, and as they rode away from the swamp where the dead brand-burner lay buried, Victor spoke rapidly.

He told how it came about that Ernest Gale and Calvin Taylor had a fight, which ended in the death of the latter.

"You never saw a man so thoroughly broken up over a little thing like that, in all your life," he added, with a hard laugh. "It wouldn't take much more to make the weak boy go clean off his base. He looks on me as the only thing that stands between him and the gallows. Ah, whisky, you're the devil!"

"You want me to do what? Help prove an *alibi*?" asked the deputy-sheriff, a shade of anxiety darkening his eyes. "If any one but you had been with him, Victor!"

"I'm mighty glad it happened just so!" declared Victor, his voice growing more earnest, his eyes gleaming as he leaned over and rested one hand on his parent's arm. "Gov'nor, you know how set I've been on corraling that dainty bit, Wilda Gale. You know, too, that she gave me the shake—that not even the arguments of the old man, urged on by your influence over him, could shake her in the least. She wouldn't, and that was the end on't! But now, with this grip on Ernest, I reckon she's mine! She shall give in, or I'll hang him for murder!"

They rode on a few rods in silence, then Wesendorf glanced into the face of his son, asking:

"Where is he?"

"Ernest? Over near the old man's house, in hiding. I sent him there, with word to wait until I could bring you. I made him believe that his sister failed to recognize him."

"You met her, then?"

For answer, Victor gave a hasty account of his interview with Wilda Gale, showing the purplish welt across his brow as visible proof of his story. In turn, the sheriff informed him of her adventure with the mad ox, saying nothing, however, of the after arrest of Kit Fox, probably because they were not within sight of the Gale ranch.

"There's no time now to talk more," hurriedly uttered Wesendorf, with a slight nod toward the house, through the open door of which they could just catch a glimpse of a woman, whom they both readily recognized. "That's Wilda herself. She's seen us, but we'll give her no time to dodge us. Do you go and find Ernest. Keep him in hand until I whistle for you, then bring him on the scene."

"All right, gov'nor! But if the fool ever gets sober and realizes that we've sold him out, he'll try to get even, sure!"

"Time enough to provide for that emergency when it arises. It may be that he'll have something of more importance to look after," with a grim chuckle.

"You don't mean to hang him?"

"It may be worth while, when you've made sure of the girl," was the short reply. "The ranch would be hers, then, and the day will come when it will be worth an independent fortune."

There was time for no more talk, and Victor shot abruptly off to the right, soon vanishing behind a clump of timber, his father riding directly up to the ranch and alighting.

Leaving his well-trained horse standing free, Carl Wesendorf entered the house, lightly saluting the inmates.

Mrs. Gale, a frail looking little woman, on whose once beautiful face were written deep lines of grief and suffering that had aged her long before her time, silently acknowledged his bow. Abner Gale muttered something in a sulky tone, but Wilda, her cheeks flushed, her eyes sparkling, boldly confronted him, her voice ringing out clearly:

"Your coming has saved me a trip to your house, Carl Wesendorf. What have you done with that boy? If you have dared to harm him, after what he did for me this day, I'll never know rest until you are fitly punished!"

"Wilda, gal!" muttered Gale, with an uneasy glance into the stern face of the sheriff.

"Let her talk, old pard," and Wesendorf laughed shortly. "It's not often that a young and romantic girl meets with an adventure of this sort, and she must make the most of it."

"He saved my life!"

"And, in accordance with the rules of romance, you are eager to reward him with your hand, no doubt?" he sneered.

"I might do worse," was the spirited retort. "Take your precious son, for instance! I met him to-day, and he renewed his odious suit. When you meet him, ask him how he received that scar across his face. If he tells the truth, he'll say it is a badge of disgrace given him for insulting a lady!"

"I have seen it, and he has told me all," was the cold response. "Victor wishes to return good for evil, and has made me his ambassador. He wishes to marry you."

"Time enough for that, Carl," muttered Gale, uneasily.

"There's no time like the present, and—"

"Then take my reply, once for all!" cried Wilda, pale but fearless as she confronted him. "I'll never marry Victor Wesendorf. I hate him—hate the very name he bears and the air he breathes! Father, be a man once more! Tell him to go, and never again disgrace an honest man's house!"

"An honest man—ha! ha! You hear that, Abner Gale? As you are an honest man, bid me levant, and I'll go—to lay information that will forever solve the mystery which envelops the death of Cuthbert Dearn! Shall I go, man? Speak out!"

With a hollow groan the giant bowed his head, hiding his face between his trembling hands. Wilda stood aghast, while Mrs. Gale glided forward and knelt beside her husband, tears streaming down her pale face.

"How like you his answer, my dainty bird?" laughed the villain, his eyes glowing redly. "Let him say the word, and I will go—but the hangman will come in my stead!"

"It is false—false as your own vile heart!" panted Wilda, springing to Abner Gale's side and shaking him frantically by the shoulder. "Father, give him the lie!"

Slowly the giant raised his head. There was an uncertain light in his eyes that might have rendered a less daring man cautious, but Carl Wesendorf knew his power too thoroughly.

"He dares not, girl. He knows his sin, and knows, too, that I can bring it home to him. One word from my lips will place him on the scaffold for the murder of Cuthbert Dearn!"

"You lie, devil!" gasped Abner Gale, leaping to his feet so abruptly that his weak wife was flung forward on her face. "I never hurt him! If there was murder done, you did it!"

"It will be lucky for you, old man, if you can get a jury to take that view of the case when the pinch comes. And come it will, without you can bring that silly, headstrong girl to hear to reason. Let her marry Victor, and it will be to my interests to destroy the proofs I now hold of your crime!"

"He lies, father, and we, your dear ones, believe you when you proclaim your innocence. Tell him to do his worst—only drive the slimy serpent of evil from your door forever!"

"It is a lie—I never killed the ole man!" repeated the giant settler, gaining courage from that appeal.

"I can prove it, and more!" cried Wesendorf, his eyes glittering with vicious delight. "Not only did you murder Cuthbert Dearn, but your precious son is also a murderer!"

Turning his head, Carl Wesendorf uttered a shrill whistle that rung through the open doorway. He turned again to Wilda, whose flushed countenance had turned ghastly pale. Abner Gale stood like one stunned, while the mother knelt on the floor, sobbing painfully.

"I believe Victor told you something of this, when he met you to-day, Miss Wilda Gale, but if I followed him correctly, he failed to mention any names. I'll make amends for his carelessness, for I believe you will feel deeply interested. The man whom your brother killed—killed when the poor devil was unarmed, remember—was Calvin Taylor!"

"My love!" gasped Wilda, reeling, but almost instantly recovering. "You are lying! Ernest is no murderer—and least of all would he kill the one whom—Seel!" with a hysterical sob, as Ernest Gale hastily crossed the threshold, under an impulse lent by the powerful arm of Victor Wesendorf. "He comes to refute your lying charge! Brother—say he lies in his throat! Say you never—never killed—"

The words choked her, and a look of intense

horror overspread her face as she saw that look of craven shame upon the liquor-bloated face of her brother. Sick and faint she staggered back, almost falling to the floor.

Stupefied by the vile poison which still fermented in his stomach, Abner Gale stared from one speaker to the other, trying to follow their meaning. A glimmer of the terrible truth penetrated his befogged brain as he noted that look on the countenance of his son, and with one long stride he gained his side, one heavy hand grasping his shoulder.

"Look up, lad," he muttered, hoarsely. "Look up an' tell me he lies. Say it ain't true, an' I'll mash his bones like I would a egg-shell fer lyin' onto ye like this! Say it!"

Those bleared eyes faltered and drooped. The youth trembled violently, but then, as his father shook him again, he faltered in uncertain tones:

"I didn't mean—it was an accident."

With a moaning sob Wilda sunk senseless to the floor, her father flinging Ernest aside and catching her in his arms.

CHAPTER XI.

A BITTER ALTERNATIVE.

WITHOUT an effort to save himself, the wretched son, on being cast so violently aside by his father, fell heavily to the floor. With a low, sobbing cry, his mother dragged herself toward him, folding his trembling head to her bosom, flinging a half-defiant, half beseeching glance into the faces of the two merciless scoundrels who held them in a grip of steel.

"Very affecting—make a lovely tableau, and all that," sarcastically uttered Carl Wesendorf, his huge mustaches curling, heartless brutality written upon his face and ringing in his tones. "But, all the same, it isn't business, my dear friend, and you're old enough to be setting a better example to your family."

"Heven't you done enough harm a'ready, Carl Wesendorf?" hoarsely demanded Abner Gale, with one of his brief flashes of spirit. "Better go your way while you kin. It ain't in human natur' fer to stan' much more. Go your way, I warn ye, man!"

"You've only heard talk, so far, old man; what will you do when it comes down to sober business! And come it shall, sure as there's a sky above our heads! unless you bring that foolish girl to her senses."

"You'd ought to know me by this time, Ab Gale. I'm a true bull-dog when I close my teeth; the bite has got to come out or my jaw must break. Victor, here, has taken a crazy fancy to Wilda, and thinks he can't live without her. He's all I've got to care for, and what he fancies he's going to have, if I can get it for him."

"But the pore child don't—don't keer fer him that way, Carl," muttered the giant settler, his short-lived defiance already showing signs of dying out.

"The greater idiot she, then," was the coarse retort. "I don't care a continental for that. Victor wants her, and what he wants he's going to have, if it takes a leg! Let her marry him, and you'll find us nicer than pie. If she won't, then I'll make a clean breast of it, even though my office will oblige me to put the noose around your neck with my own hands!"

"If I done it—which I can't b'lieve—it was your cussed urgin' that driv' me to it, Carl Wesendorf! Your cussed eggin' on an' your whisky! In the eye o' the Lord, you're a heap sight wuss criminal than I be!"

The deputy-sheriff laughed softly as he retorted:

"That may all be, my dear fellow, but I've got the proofs, while you have none. Besides, the Lord has precious little to do with business affairs here in Wicked Wilbarger."

"It's a miracle He don't strike you down to death, with such vile blasphemy on your lips, Carl Wesendorf!" solemnly uttered Mrs. Gale, lifting one hand on high as though calling down the vengeance of Heaven on the head of the scoffer.

But the villain paid not the slightest attention to her, his face growing sterner, his voice harder, as he addressed the giant brand-burner:

"I've given you more grace than you had any right to expect, Abner Gale, but the time has come now when you've got to decide once for all. It's either a wedding or a hanging! If Wilda will show her good sense by taking Victor and making him a good wife, as the world goes, we'll meet you more than half-way. We're not fortune-hunters. I can count down dollar for dollar with you, and still have enough left to begin the same performance over again when

your pocket is drained. But you know all this as well as I can tell you.

"Coax or drive Wilda to wed Victor, and we'll save both you and Ernest from the natural consequences of your crimes. So far, only we two are acquainted with the whole truth."

"If not—if you yield to her silly nonsense—then you and your son will be arrested for murder before the moon rises to-night. Come—your answer, old fellow!"

It was a bitter alternative, none the less so from the brutal plainness with which it had been stated. The mother groaned, her head bowing over the trembling form of her son, who still lay groveling on the floor where he had been cast by the strong arm of his half-crazed father. At that sound, Abner Gale cast one glance toward her, another at the pale face of his daughter on his bosom, where he could detect the signs of regaining consciousness. Then, with an energy born of utter desperation, he turned upon Carl Wesendorf and cried:

"Do your wu'st, you cussed blood-sucker! Hangin' can't be no harder to b'ar than the life you've made me lead ever sense that black night! Do your wu'st, darn ye!"

"Remember!" with savage earnestness, leaning forward and spitting out the words as though they were venom itself. "It means hanging by the neck until you are dead—you and your noble son yonder! Think of it, Ab Gale!"

With a choking groan, the defiant attitude of the brand-burner changed for one of miserable dejection and fear. Yet, almost mechanically, he repeated his defiance:

"Do your wu'st—hang me—hang the boy—I can't help it ef you're a mind to push us over the bank. Do your wu'st!"

"No!" cried Wilda, freeing herself from the tremulous embrace of her wretched parent, still faint, but facing their tormentor with all of her old-time spirit. "No! for his sake I will sacrifice myself. Give up the proofs you speak of, Carl Wesendorf, and I'll marry your son."

Victor uttered a cry of triumphant joy, starting toward the maiden as though to clasp her in his arms, only to falter in confusion as she motioned him back with flashing eyes and quivering hand.

"Keep your distance, Victor Wesendorf!"

"Why, what do you mean, Wilda?" he stammered.

"That I will marry you to save my father and Ernest, but if you dare to touch me before that bargain is signed and sealed, I'll kill you like I would a poisonous serpent that tried to sting me!"

Carl Wesendorf turned a shade paler as he watched her face and noted that strange light in her eyes. His fears for his son were awakened, and he muttered hurriedly:

"Better drop it, Vic! She's a devil, if ever one took on the shape of woman! She'll stab you to the heart the first time you attempt to touch her—the little demon!"

With an oath Victor cast off his hand, grating savagely:

"I'd marry her if I knew it would be my death the next minute! Let me alone for taming the proud little beauty when once I get her under my thumb."

Even in those moments of misery, with utter wretchedness all around her as well as within her own bleeding heart, poor Wilda could smile; but there was nothing of joy or mirth in the expression. Rather, it was as though she caught a glimpse of a bitter, thorough vengeance on the destroyers of her happiness. Well might Carl Wesendorf tremble for the future of his worshiped son!

As it happened, however, he failed to catch that smile, for he had turned to Abner Gale once more, saying sharply:

"You hear, old man! Wilda has concluded to listen to reason, and will save your neck from the noose by marrying Victor. We have wasted so much time trying to coax the skittish filly, that I'll wait no longer. Get her ready for the ceremony at once, for I'll have—"

"Give her more time, Mr. Wesendorf," huskily uttered Mrs. Gale, looking up once more. "It is a terrible trial for a poor young child—give her a little time to think it over."

"Five hours, but not a minute more," was his cold reply, as he took out and glanced at his watch. "I'll bring the minister here; at ten o'clock precisely, I shall expect Wilda to be ready for the sacrifice—as she terms it. If anything goes wrong—if she still hangs fire then, I'll arrest both Abner and Ernest Gale, to answer for the charge of murder!"

"I will be ready," said Wilda, pale as a corpse, but her voice was cold and steady. "Until then, leave us alone."

"At ten o'clock sharp, mind! Come, Victor, let's go."

"Go you, if you like," bluntly retorted that respectable scion. "I'm going to stay here. Suppose they take a notion to levant while we're waiting for the appointed time? I've had hard enough work to win her consent, and I'm not going to run any risks of making a botch of it, at this stage—not any!"

Proud and haughty, her eyes flashing, Wilda Gale confronted the dastardly wretch, her voice ringing out sharply:

"Go with the old bloodhound, you snarling cur! Go, and I keep the promise I have made. Refuse, and I'll retract—I swear it by all that honest men hold holy!"

"Come, Vic!" impatiently muttered the sheriff. "There's work for us both to do before the hour arrives which is to make you the happiest of men. Come on, boy!"

But still the young man hesitated, moodily staring into the cold, proud face of the brand-burner's daughter.

"You're up to some cunning trick, my lady! If you mean to play a square game, what makes you object to my remaining here until the preacher comes to unite us?"

"Because the very sight of you is rank poison to me!" was the spirited reply. "Because I am yet my own mistress, and terrible though the alternative appears, the weight of a mere feather would be sufficient to make me take back my promise and dare you to do your worst. Stay, and I defy you both."

Sullenly, reluctantly, Victor Wesendorf yielded to the heavy hand which his cooler father put on his shoulder, moving toward the door, but saying as he went:

"Of course I'll go, if you mean it, Wilda; but look out! I'm no saint, and if you try to play me for a fool at this stage of the game, there'll be the devil and all to pay!"

Without giving him time to say more, or awaiting a reply, Carl Wesendorf forced him out-doors, muttering sourly as they gained their horses:

"Have you gone crazy, Victor? Couldn't you let well enough alone? Why rub on a smarting sore like that?"

"How could I help it, when the little spittfire flashed out on me?" sulkily. "I tell you she's up to some trick!"

"Let her try it, and I'll hang father and son the—"

"Much good that would do me!" half-laughed Victor, as he swung himself into the saddle. "It's a wedding I want most, not a hanging—a wife, not a couple of cadavers!"

"Look out that she don't make one out of you, boy," soberly said the sheriff, as they rode away from the ranch. "There was a wicked devil in her eyes when she looked at you that sent the cold chills creeping up and down my spine. She looked like one who'd not think twice before putting a knife between your ribs or dropping a spider in your dumpling!"

"I'll run the risks, once she is fast tied to me. I like the spice of the devil in a girl. If she don't balk when the pinch comes, I'll look out for the after-clap."

"She has passed her word, and with the double inducement we can offer, she'll not dare to break it," was the more confident reply.

"Now, Vic, I want you to go—"

"Sorry, gov'nor," with a glance behind them as they passed around the curve in the road which cast a clump of timber between them and the house, "but I'm going no farther just now. Get some of the boys to do your errand."

"What do you mean?"

"To wait here and watch," was the cool response, as he drew rein. "I'm not satisfied about Wilda. I saw mischief in her eyes. I believe she means to run away, or to go to some of the neighbors and set a trap for us. She might, you know. Suppose she should hide some one in the house to listen while she drew us out?"

"Nonsense! it would only hang her father and brother, not injure us in the least. You're going crazy, Vic!"

But the stubborn lever would not listen to reason. He shook off the hand that would have detained him, and rode into the timber. Carl Wesendorf hesitated for a brief space, then, with a muttered curse, he rode on toward his ranch.

Victor dismounted and secured his horse, then took his rifle and stood near the edge of the timber where he could command a full view of the Gale building.

His patience was not long tasked. In less than half an hour after he took up his position, his eyes glittered and he caught his breath sharply

as he saw Wilda, dressed for riding, leave the house and enter the little stable in which he knew she kept her saddle-horse.

Swift of foot, Victor ran across the open, keeping as much as possible in line with the stable, to hide his approach from those in the house, and just as Wilda was emerging from the stall with her horse, saddled and bridled, he paused in front of the door with a low, mocking laugh, saying:

"Off on a journey, little one? Whither bound?"

"I was going over to Mrs. Taylor's, to see if you spoke the truth about—that," she faltered, choking.

"All right, you may go. But when you come back, it will be to see father and brother arrested for murder!" he said, coldly.

Without a word, she released the horse and returned to the house, Victor seating himself on a log, his rifle across his lap, a silent, watchful sentinel.

CHAPTER XII.

A CEREMONY CUT SHORT.

A LITTLE flushed with anger at what he considered the foolish suspicions of his hopeful son, Carl Wesendorf pressed briskly along, in haste to reach home, where the first duty of several rather peculiar ones, awaited him. And as he dismounted before the door, he cast his reins to one of the men, uttering words which, if understood, must have sounded pleasantly to the sweat dripping horse:

"Shift rigging to Wide-awake, and have him ready for me in five minutes. Rub this fellow down and cool him off before you feed or water him. Step lively!"

Entering the house, the fastenings of which were hastily removed as his voice was recognized, the deputy-sheriff at once strode through to the room in which was the trap door leading to the cellar below. Here, as he had been left, was the fellow whom he called Tinker, on guard.

"All right below? No trouble, I suppose?"

"Not a sou' from down thar, nur any sign o' trouble from the outside, boss," was the quick reply.

At a sign from his master the burly fellow lifted the trap door, and guided by the dim rays of light coming from the lantern which had been left with the prisoner and his guards Carl Wesendorf descended into the cellar.

All was just as he had left it. Kit Fox reclined in the corner chained hand, foot and middle, while Van Loon, his guard, squatted before him with pistol in hand, grim and silent.

As the latter person arose, Wesendorf spoke to him:

"You can go above for a few minutes, Van. It is likely you will have to pass the night down here, so you can make all necessary arrangements."

With a respectful nod, the henchman turned and ran up the steps, leaving Carl Wesendorf alone with his prisoner.

"How do you like it as far as you've got, Emory Dearn?"

"None the better fur seein' you," was the cool reply. "When a man is shet up in a hole like this, he ain't over anxious fer a skunk to 'vide up his quarters with him."

"You are complimentary, I must say."

"Ef you *must* talk, put it in mighty few words, *do!* The less you chaw onto the atmosphere you leave ahind you, the sweeter it'll be fer a honest lad to swaller—*ough!*"

Despite himself, the deputy-sheriff was stung by the tone of utter contempt with which these words were uttered, and Kit Fox laughed mockingly as his keen eyes caught the red flush creeping over the face of his enemy.

"They is some shame left in ye, then? Waal, who'd 'a' thunk it? Say, *you!* Ef the man in ye ain't all rotten, mebber you'll turn me loose jest long enough to punch the stuffin' out o' ye? Give me ten minnits, an' we'll call it squar'."

"You shall be set at liberty in the morning, Emory Dearn, unless you die of fear in the mean time," was the cool response of the sheriff. "This night my son Victor marries Wilda Gale. If you choose to hang her father tomorrow, for the murder of Cuthbert Dearn, I don't know as there'll be much harm done. Wilda will be all the richer."

"An' whar do *you* come in?"

"What do you mean?"

"That it ain't no dead-open-an'-shet that you didn't do that neat little job your own self, Carl Wesendorf!"

"Look up the real facts and satisfy yourself on that point, before striking, if you like. I'll

never lose a wink of good sleep for fear of the consequences," laughed Wesendorf as he turned and passed out of the cellar.

He found Van Loon ready to return to his post, but at a silent signal from him, the door was lowered and the two guards followed him into the adjoining room. In hasty, guarded tones, he said:

"That young fellow you are guarding is a dangerous customer to men of our peculiar persuasion, boys. He is the college-bred son of old man Dearn, come here in disguise, with a commission from the Governor as detective, thinking to get at the bottom of our secrets."

"Ef you give the nod, boss, I'll settle him," said Tinker, significantly tapping the handle of his huge knife.

"You forget that I am an officer of the law, now, and must frown on all deeds of violence," laughed Wesendorf, with a facetious wink that almost convulsed his henchmen with mirth. "All the same, I'm afraid the young gentleman is in a very uncertain state of health, and if he lives to see to-morrow's sun, I shall ever regard it as a Texas miracle!"

"Van Loon, to you I intrust the keys to his irons. Keep them safely, and surrender them only with your life—unless a mob should take it into their heads to pay him a visit. Of course neither of you can accomplish impossibilities, and in case any such unfortunate event should occur during my absence, you will yield to force as gracefully as you know how. Simply beg of them not to paint my cellar red—if hang they must, let it be outside. And you go along to see that they don't botch the job. It would be inhuman to torture the poor devil unnecessarily!"

They listened as gravely as he spoke, and Van Loon took the keys which were handed him, returning to his place, while Tinker lit his pipe and mounted guard over the closed trap door.

Carl Wesendorf left the room and found the horse he had ordered awaiting his coming at the threshold. He leaped lightly into the saddle, then motioned the man to follow him. When in an open spot, sufficiently distant from the house or any cover which could possibly afford shelter to an eavesdropper, the sheriff bent low in his saddle and whispered long and earnestly into the patient ear of his man.

"You are quite sure you understand, Simpson?" he added, rising erect and casting a keen glance around him through the rapidly gathering gloom.

"I'll hev my part done inside o' two hours, boss," was the prompt response. "Nur the boys won't botch thar sheer."

"That's enough. Remember, I'm not to know anything at all of what is going on. The honest citizens have found out, somehow, that I have a dangerous brand-burner in my house, and they have resolved to make an example of him while I am absent."

Giving his spirited horse free rein, Carl Wesendorf rode swiftly away to finish his preliminary work, feeling thoroughly satisfied with what he had thus far accomplished.

His next halt took place at the house of a Methodist preacher, who had been sent into "Wicked Wilbarger" by his church as a sort of experimental missionary, and who made both ends meet by working a diminutive farm through the week.

There is no necessity for us to record his argument in this case. It is sufficient to state that his mission was perfectly successful, that the worthy servant of the Lord promised faithfully to be at the Gale ranch as the clock struck nine, that night, and that he was very proud and happy as he dropped a handful of coin into the lap of his overworked wife, after Carl Wesendorf galloped rapidly away. A few more such wedding-fees, and the grim wolf would trouble them no more for many a glad day!

Straight back to the Gale ranch rode Carl Wesendorf, satisfied that he had done enough plotting and scheming for one night, drawing a sigh of relief as Victor, who had sat on that log, rifle across lap, ever since, patiently watching the house to make sure his coveted prize did not escape him, rose with a blunt greeting:

"Back at last, are you? Why didn't you stop all night?"

"I've had your share of the work to do, as well as my own," was the quiet reply. "I've wasted no time, as you'll say when you come to understand all."

"Curse your intricate plottings!" sullenly muttered the hopeful scion, with an ugly side-glance. "I care nothing for that. What I'm after is to make sure of Wilda. She's tried once to make a flitting, and had I followed

your advice, our game would have played out in grand style!"

"She's in the house now?"

"Unless she's vanished up the chimney—yes."

"Very good. You wait here until the dominie comes, then enter with him. You won't have much longer to wait. I paid him so well that he'll be ahead of time, rather than behind it."

Carl Wesendorf moved toward the door of the house, Victor taking a step or two as though to follow him, but then, with a sulky, muttered oath, he resumed his seat on the log.

"What! all in the dark?" cried Wesendorf, lightly, as he stepped across the threshold into which he and his devilish schemes had brought gloom and misery. "Come, come, my dear friends! this will never do! One would fancy you were about to have a funeral, rather than a wedding! Give us a little light on the subject, old mate!"

There was enough light coming from the old-time fire-place to show Carl Wesendorf the bowed forms of Abner Gale and his son. Neither of the women were visible, but his keen ears could just detect the murmuring sound of voices in an adjoining room, and he knew Wilda and her mother were there.

In sullen silence Abner Gale lit a lamp, then resumed his seat. Wesendorf gazed steadily at him for a few moments, then strode to his side and shook him by the arm.

"Hands off, cuss you!" growled the giant, with one of his short-lived fits of fury. "The devil's a-urging me to take you by the throat an' squeeze the life out o' ye fer a dirty, double-dealin' liar an' sneak! Han's off, ef you're wise!"

"I'll clap irons on those wrists of yours, you sullen dog, if you lift one finger!" boldly cried Wesendorf, his eyes calming the other like magic. "You know me. I can hang both you and your cub, yonder. I don't *want* to do it—I *won't* do it, if you listen to reason. Pay attention, now."

"The preacher will soon be here. He need never know but you enter into this marriage with hearty good-will, unless you tell him better by your infernal sulkiness. If he suspects anything wrong, he'll never perform the ceremony. If it fails to come off now—if Wilda Gale is not the wife of my son before the clock strikes twelve—I'll clap you both in irons and never know rest or sleep until you are hung!"

The giant brand-burner quailed, while Ernest uttered a low groan of utter misery. Whisky had so thoroughly destroyed their nerves that they crouched like whipped dogs at the feet of their master. Then Wesendorf spoke again, but in milder tones:

"Brace up and be men. I hear the strokes of a horse's hoofs, and I reckon it's the dominie. Remember!"

He was right. A few minutes later the minister and Victor Wesendorf entered the house together. Thus severely warned, both Abner Gale and Ernest managed to greet the preacher without greatly exciting his wonder. He knew them by reputation, and could trace the scent of liquor on the air. This, no doubt aided to keep the scales over his eyes.

But he was destined to have cause for wondering still deeper before all was done. For, when Abner Gale, urged by a silent signal from Carl Wesendorf, called the women, Wilda entered with her mother, both showing traces of bitter weeping.

Victor gave a sudden start, and his father choked back a savage oath, as they saw the bride elect. From head to foot she was draped in black, without a trace of color to relieve the somberness of her costume!

The poor minister gazed helplessly from one face to another, in hopes of an explanation, and Carl Wesendorf proved himself equal to the emergency. He hastily stepped forward and whispered in his ear:

"I will explain later. She has just received tidings of the death of a very dear—But hush! she must not be agitated."

"Then, under the melancholy circumstances, would it not be better—be more appropriate—to postpone the ceremony?"

"Impossible—do not hint at such a thing! Rest assured it is all right. They are waiting for you, sir."

Confused, bewildered, the minister produced his book, and Victor stepped across to Wilda's side. She was white as a corpse, but firm and composed—far more so than Victor, who could not entirely stifle a fierce curse as the conscientious minister spoke deliberately:

"My dear young lady, you are of course

ready and willing that I should marry you to this young gentleman? Pardon me if I—"

"Of course she is willing!" muttered Victor. Carl Wesendorf hastily interposed:

"Excuse his impatience, reverend sir. Naturally he is excited by the prospect of getting such a charming wife. As for the lady—Wilda, dear, can you not set his doubts at rest?"

"If she can't, maybe I can!" cried a sharp, clear voice from the darkness without, followed by a light bound that carried the speaker across the threshold into the full glow of the lamps.

With a snarling curse Carl Wesendorf wheeled, uttering a gasping cry as he recognized the bold intruder.

Kit Fox, clasping a cocked revolver in each hand, a cold, dangerous smile upon his face, stern fire in his eyes.

"I want you, Carl Wesendorf, for murder!" he cried, each syllable shooting from his lips like a bullet.

Carl Wesendorf caught a glimpse of other forms just beyond the threshold, and realized that his race was run unless he could fight his way to liberty. He made a rapid bound to one side, drawing, cocking and raising his pistol with a single motion. But if he was quick, he had to deal with one who was no whit less so.

Swift as thought Kit Fox aimed and fired, meaning to cripple the hand of his enemy, or else knock the pistol from his grasp. His lead flew true enough, but though it struck the revolver, glanced aside and buried itself in the breast of the desperate man, who fell to the floor with a choking curse of bitter agony and bitter rage, his own lead spending its force on the wall as he dropped his weapon.

Like a wild beast, Victor leaped forward and closed with the slayer of his father!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TRUTH AT LAST.

In his hand flashed a long and vicious-looking blade, and as he closed in with Kit Fox, Victor Wesendorf drove it with savage violence at the breast of him who had snatched this long-coveted morsel from almost between his lips.

But in the Border Boy Detective, the young desperado met an antagonist more than worthy his metal. A trained gymnast, as well as one thoroughly acquainted with the use of weapons of offense and defense, Kit Fox foiled the thrust by a sinuous bend of his lithe figure, then tripped his furious antagonist and flung him backward to the floor, adding his own weight to the stunning shock. The knife flew across the room, Victor gasped and groaned, struggling faintly. Before he could do anything to turn the tide, Kit Fox snapped a pair of handcuffs around his wrists, then leaped up just as a dozen stout, well-armed men followed him into the room.

With a warning cry, one of them suddenly thrust Kit Fox to one side just as a pistol-shot exploded, followed by a grating cry of angry pain. Then he leaped forward and twisted the revolver from the trembling hand of Carl Wesendorf, who was trying to cock it for another shot.

"I had to do it, boss," muttered Bouncing Bill Fracker, apologetically, as Kit sprang to his aid. "I see the p'izen imp goin' fer ye, an' they wasn't time fer argufyin'."

"Curse you!" grated the sheriff, his blue eyes like balls of red-hot metal as he glared impotently into the face of his slayer. "If I could only kill you, I wouldn't care a—"

His voice died away, his head drooped, and he lay like a dead man.

Kit Fox cast a hasty glance around him. He saw that his men had placed Abner and Ernest Gale under guard. Mrs. Gale had fainted, while Wilda knelt beside her, trying to restore her to consciousness. He rose quickly and motioned his men to release the giant brand-burner, then said:

"Abner Gale, so far as I am concerned, you are at perfect liberty. Until yesterday, I believed you guilty of murdering my father, Cuthbert Dearn. I began to doubt, when I saw you and Carl Wesendorf together, and this very evening I have learned the truth. Carl Wesendorf committed that crime, laying it at your door. One of his tools has confessed it all!"

Emory Dearn spoke the truth. Thanks to faithful Bouncing Bill Fracker and his fellows, the mystery had been completely solved.

Hoping to discover the truth and punish those who had caused his father's death, Emory Dearn, making use of family influence, left college and assumed a disguise, bearing with him a commission as detective of the secret service, under Government employ. Besides the three

cowboys, he enlisted nearly a dozen trusty men who were to hold themselves in readiness to act on the shortest notice. It was to these men that Emory referred when he bade Bill Fracker remember orders.

First seeing his young master stowed away in the ranch, and detaining Tom Hickey to keep an eye on the movements of Carl Wesendorf, Bill and Dick hastened to join the other members of the party. With them, he was moving back to the Wesendorf ranch when they were fairly run into by Simpson, whom Bill recognized as one of the men in the sheriff's employ.

From him the truth was judiciously extracted, after a little manual exercise in which skin was broken and blood drawn, by "a course of sprouts."

Carl Wesendorf had sent him to warn his fellow brand-burners that Kit Fox must be lynched. That hint was sufficient for our quick-witted friends. Masks were hastily improvised, and leaving Simpson tied to a tree they hastened to the ranch.

Thanks to the precautions taken by Carl Wesendorf himself, their object was readily gained, and when Kit Fox was set at liberty his guards took his place. Every person in or about the place was captured, ironed and confined, then the young detective, leaving a small guard, hastened to the Gale ranch, arriving "just in the nick of time."

An examination proved that Carl Wesendorf was fatally injured, and when he fully comprehended this fact, and was confronted by Tinker, who had confessed all, his reckless spirit conquered his resolve to die without speaking.

With a relish that was frightful to witness, he revealed the cunning scheme by which he secured a noble herd of choice cattle and gained a firm ascendancy over Abner Gale. They captured Cuthbert Dearn, and when Gale was stupefied with strong drink, they hung him, after the style above detailed. When his senses partially returned, they made Abner Gale believe he had committed the dastardly outrage.

Scarcely had Carl Wesendorf completed this revelation when hurried steps were noted, and a number of settlers hastened to the house, halting in confusion as they were sternly challenged by Bouncing Bill Fracker.

One of their number advanced, and oh! what joy did the news he carried bring to the sore hearts of the Gale family!

Calvin Taylor had been discovered and restored to consciousness sufficiently to tell his story. He swore that while he struggled to free himself from the grip of Ernest Gale, both of whose hands were fastened around his throat, preventing him from crying out, he saw Victor Wesendorf steal up and strike with a dagger. He felt the blade pierce his breast, then swooned away.

Before Carl Wesendorf died, he was confronted by one more brutal crime. Tom Hickey had performed his work to perfection, and was an eye-witness of the death of Dan Masters. He told his story, and on the day following, the brand-burner was dug out of the swamp and given a more decent burial.

Victor Wesendorf was brought to trial and convicted of assault with intent to kill—and Calvin Taylor was one of the witnesses against him. He was sentenced to a term of imprisonment, but the sight of Wilda Gale, more beautiful than ever, leaning on the arm of her proud lover, was a more bitter blow to him than the verdict of the jury or sentence of the judge.

He never went to jail, however. A dose of poison was conveyed to him, in all probability, by one of the extensive gang of brand-burners, who feared lest he should make some damaging confessions, and he died the death of a dog.

Both Abner and Ernest Gale took warning by the past, and though the giant brand-burner once in a while falls from grace—on the wedding of Wilda and Calvin, for instance—they have "sworn off." As a natural consequence, they are growing more and more prosperous. Ernest is courting a fine, sensible young lady, and rumor has it that they are soon to be married. It is certain that they are very warm friends and, though after a more platonic fashion, of course, so is he with Calvin Taylor and Emory Dearn—no longer Kit Fox.

The latter did not cease his efforts with the solution of the mystery which enshrouded his father's death, but pushed his investigations so briskly that the brand-burners began to tremble and grow very shaky. He found out that many men whom the common herd looked up to

with awe and reverence, were closely interested in the cattle-stealing business. He laid the plot which resulted in the exposure and dismissal in disgrace of the then sheriff of Wicked Wilbarger.

But why say more? The whole tale has been told in the columns of our enterprising newspapers; go look for it there, ye who are curious!

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